

THE AESTHETICS OF CONTINGENCY:
CONTESTING LITERARY MODERNITY IN THE 1930S AND BEYOND

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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May 2012

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Cornell University 2012

This dissertation explores the aesthetics and ethics of attempts to formalize and coordinate modern—i.e., disenchanted, antagonistic, contingent—understandings of the self and the social, the sexual and the political. In Part One, “Coordinating Private and Public Contingencies,” I delineate an intellectual genealogy of attempts by cultural and social theorists to account for a modern recognition of the self and society as both riven by innate internal antagonisms and both subject to anarchic contingencies in development. I focus on Marx’s and Baudelaire’s resonant reflections on the popular failure of the 1848 revolution in France, and sketch an ensuing aesthetic-theoretical tradition of reading literary forms as cognate with and offering insights into the ideological totalizations of social and political forms. In Part Two, “The Resistance to Contingency,” I critique the content and critical reception of Walter Benjamin’s highly influential dismissals, on supposedly progressive political grounds, of Baudelaire’s aesthetic and ethical insights, grounding my analysis in a comparative reading of Benjamin’s transcendental historical schemas in his political work against Baudelaire’s decidedly immanent ones in his lyrics. In Part Three, “Contingency and/as Liberty,” I explore this congruence of political and literary aesthetics further in an analysis of three George Orwell novels. I develop an argument about how the critical reception of these novels has not consistently considered their narrative structures’ insinuation that conceptualizations and formalizations of the domestic decisively condition and constrain those of the political. In the conclusion, “Modernity, not ‘Modernism,’” I offer an argument about the need to think of a literary “modernity” more capacious than the

conventional confines of literary “modernism” by juxtaposing the “high modernist” Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* with a text of the Weimar-era legal theorist Carl Schmitt. I bring out their shared recognition of innate interpersonal antagonisms and their shared concern for the unprogrammable contingencies of political developments, but note their strikingly contrasting accounts of responsible decision-making given such awareness. Against Schmitt’s aporetic distinction of an organic community of friends, I expound Woolf’s more trenchant ethical vision of political community, one grounded in her less idealistic vision of domestic politics.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sonam Singh was born in Kullu, Himachal Pradesh, India. He moved with his family to the United States when he was seven years old. He completed elementary school in Norwich, CT, and attended middle school and high school in Niskayuna, NY. He has a B.A. from Haverford College, where he majored in English, and an M.A. from Cornell University in English Language and Literature.

Dedicated to my mother,
without whose support I could not have finished it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my special committee—Jonathan Culler, Douglas Mao, Timothy Murray, and Neil Saccamano—for the feedback and support they have given during the writing of this dissertation. I am particularly indebted to the models that Jonathan Culler has provided in his scholarship for precise readings of the formal and rhetorical specificity of literary texts. I also owe a great debt to my advisors and teachers at Haverford College—Debora Sherman, Rajeswari Mohan, and Kimberly Benston—for instilling in me the skills to undertake humanities research and the confidence to persevere when matters seemed most discouraging. Friends and family have provided many kinds of help during the planning and writing of this dissertation. Here I can only note the extremely generous emotional, intellectual, and material support provided in recent years by Tyler Anderson, Cheryl Beredo, Rebecca Colesworthy, Jonah Corne, Bradley Dillon-Coffman, Lisa Estreich, Daniel Gomes, Maja Horn, Kevin Lamb, Elisa Lewis, Stephani Pierce, Preeti Singh, Ariana Vigil, and Adelheid Voskuhl.

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INTRODUCTION:

A Contingent Modernity

Modernity: A Provisional Definition

This is a dissertation centered on the challenges inherent in giving form to relations and processes understood to be contingent, and it takes the recognition and conceptualization of such contingency in the formation of the human psyche, the formation of human society, the formation of human language, and the formation of the human species to be the defining feature of modern thought, of what could be called intellectual modernity (as distinct from any developmental ideology of a political-economic modernization and globalization or of a literary-cultural modernism and postmodernism). The giving of form is the domain of aesthetics, so aesthetics will be taken throughout as an apt analytic for understanding the ideological work of and ideological relations between political and literary conceptualizations of such understandings. This dissertation takes as axiomatic that a recognition of the contingent unfolding of human history at its multiple levels, from ontogenesis to phylogenesis and at every scale of relation in between, necessitates a rejection of alternative versions of historical unfolding predicated upon the influence of metaphysical forces or forms. The dissertation does not deny, however, that the difficulty of abandoning such ingrained beliefs and habits of thought at every scale poses a considerable and continuing challenge to even the seemingly most non-foundationalist modern thought.

An important corollary to the axiom above, developed in this thought, is that the play of contingent forces will necessarily feature a fundamental antagonism amongst their unguided interactions, a recognition that recourse to metaphysical principles occludes. There is no reason

experientially, empirically, or theoretically to believe that harmony, unity, complementarity, or balance—especially when projected backwards upon supposedly “pre-modern” forms of life and society—are anything other than ideological impositions upon the formlessness of the world. Thus, the modern recognition of contingency raises not only significant aesthetic challenges in constructing forms, inevitably provisional whether political or literary, that can keep faith with inherently formless contingencies, but it also raises significant ethical challenges in constructing provisional political and literary forms that can simultaneously be responsive to the psychic and social needs for stability. The ineluctably theological character of much secular-tending thought, what Neil Saccamano reading Jacques Derrida calls “the historical, ideological, and hegemonic traces of religion in what the Enlightenment opposes to religion—universality, humanism, tolerance, mediation, to mention only these few,” attests clearly to these challenges (421). In this dissertation, I will explore the challenge of such aesthetic and ethical labor theoretically in part one and within a set of readings relevant to a discussion of literary “modernism” in parts two and three. In the conclusion, I offer a proposal to retire “modernism,” both the period term and canon, as a marker of what is most usefully modern in twentieth-century literary and political thought.

Before going any further into the details of the chapters that follow, I want very quickly to present four exemplars of what I am calling modern thought. The aim here is simply to emphasize how similarly in their work, despite their widely-varying fields of investigation, a recognition of the role of contingency, chance, haphazardness, or randomness radically upends received notions of origins, development, progress, and ends. So first, Ferdinand de Saussure, in a section of his *Course on General Linguistics* that looks into the ways in which the pronunciation of words alters historically, asks of such phonetic changes, “Why do [climatic

influence, racial predisposition, and the tendency toward least effort] act sporadically, sometimes on one point of the phonological system and sometimes on another? A historical event must have a determining cause, yet we are not told what chances in each instance to unleash a change whose general cause has existed for a long time. This is the most difficult point to explain” (150). Grappling with the difficultly unpredictable role of powerful “chances” in the effects of seemingly explanatory historical contexts becomes a key aspect of Saussure’s well-known disruption of idealist understandings of linguistic development:

If we try to determine how far phonetic changes will go, we see immediately that they are unlimited and incalculable, i.e. we cannot foresee where they will stop. It is childish to think that the word can be changed only up to a certain point, as if there were something about it that could preserve it. Phonetic modifications derive their character from the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, which is distinct from the signified. (151-152)

In calling conventional understandings of phonetic changes—understandings which see such changes as part of a clearly-bounded and conceptually-manageable series of causal actions—“childish,” Saussure marks a sense of the superior aptness and sophistication, the modernity, of his conceptions, but he no less marks a sense of the loss suffered in abandoning understandings of the world and self as manageable and well-bounded.

Such inveterate “childish” views of development are no less an object of critique by Sigmund Freud, who alike highlights the arbitrary nature of a human construct, in his case the subject. I will address some of Freud’s theories in greater detail in chapter one, but simply note here how his schemas of psychological change recognize the unpredictable influences of contingent identifications and disidentifications, contingent sexual object choices (real and imaginary), contingent eroticizations of bodily zones, and contingent experiences that become

the material for psychic processes that re-work these over a lifetime to no certain or fixed ends. The Freudian subject displays a variety in dispositions and demeanors not easily ascribed to any immediate material or biographical context nor to any readily discernible chain of causes and effects. This subject is defined more by its psychic ambivalences than its psychic fixities. Like Saussure, Freud could readily claim of the processes that he identifies that “we cannot foresee where they will stop.” And like Saussure on the future disruptive evolutions of phonetic change, Freud offers no idealism or optimism that any transcendent redemptive forces will assure the long-term preservation of what we today know as humanity. Indeed, Freud’s thought quite explicitly registers ambivalence about the ethical implications of its modernity, a profound doubt about whether such “mature” understandings of the sources of the self and society have any necessary relation to greater happiness in either realm.

As a third example of this tradition of modern thought, consider Michel Foucault glossing Friedrich Nietzsche’s thoughts on human practices of historiography:

The forces operating in history are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanisms, but respond to haphazard conflicts. They do not manifest the successive forms of a primordial intention and their attraction is not that of a conclusion, for they always appear through the singular randomness of events. [...] We want historians to confirm our belief that the present rests upon profound intentions and immutable necessities. But the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference. (154-155)

Just as Saussure and Freud cast doubt on metaphysical or idealist accounts of the origins and the ends of particular human constructs, so too does Nietzsche via Foucault here, stripping historiography even more systematically and comprehensively of the comfort of underlying

regularities, intentions, necessities, and conclusions. Yet, Foucault's Nietzsche implicitly highlights no less clearly the stubborn endurance of those "childish" wishes, beliefs, and senses that strive to find significance, pattern, reference points, and remembrance by narrativizing a mass of contingent and only half-remembered events as a singular purposeful and complete history. The desire for a discernible guiding primordial intention and an assured awaiting destiny is not easily shaken off.

As my chief example to illustrate the ambivalent push and pull of contingency in modern thought, I offer a brief, telling excerpt from Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859). *Origin* is arguably the most central text of modernity, the one whose conceptual revolution could be said to underwrite the smaller scale reformulations by Saussure, Freud, and Foucault, among many others. It was written, too, in the same decade as two other significant modern texts in which I will ground my political and literary analyses, respectively, in the chapters that follow, Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) and Charles Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* (1857). In describing the theory of natural selection that he has developed in it, Darwin writes:

These several facts accord well with our theory, which includes no fixed law of development, causing all the inhabitants of an area to change abruptly, or simultaneously, or to an equal degree. The process of modification must be slow, and will generally affect only a few species at the same time; for the variability of each species is independent of that of all others. Whether such variations or individual differences as may arise will be accumulated through natural selection in a greater or less degree, thus causing a greater or less amount of permanent modification, will depend on many complex contingencies—on the variations being of a beneficial nature, on the freedom of

intercrossing, on the slowly changing physical conditions of the country, on the immigration of new colonists, and on the nature of the other inhabitants with which the varying species come into competition. (291)

Darwin's recognition of the sheer purposeless randomness of organic reproduction and the formlessness of its outcomes are the quintessential statements of a modern understanding of the world. He could not be any clearer that the interplay of "many complex contingencies" in the "process of modification" preclude the possibility of any "fixed law of development." However communicating such an awareness requires taking a step back into form.

There is both a lyric and a narrative component to Darwin's formulations here: he is both engaging in an oracular speech act and he is telling a naturalistic story about the history of the earth's species. Both modes are essential components of his discourse, and contribute to the kind of authority and systematicity necessary for the conceptual and communicative success of his radical revisioning. Yet at the same time, both modes can be equally held accountable for the common domestication of his thought. The anthropomorphic authority of the oracle motivates the common misapprehension of "natural selection" as the authoritative guiding hand of a supernal meritocrat, and the inevitably sequentializing habits of narrative thought motivate the misapprehension of "natural selection" as a teleology fulfilled in the human species. Literary criticism has much to learn about the ideological implications of aesthetics from such endemic popular misapprehensions of Darwin. For, even though Darwin is emphatic in castigating "our presumption in imagining for a moment that we understand the many complex contingencies on which the existence of each species depends," his need to formalize his insights within the communicative modes of human language make keeping faith with contingency difficult (297). Such difficulties are central to the literary and critical texts engaged in this dissertation: among

other concerns, the first part explores theories of the relation between aestheticization and ideology; the second part focuses on critical contestations over the modernity of Baudelaire's lyrics and understandings of the oracular voice of the lyric apostrophizer; and the third part focuses on critical contestations over the modernity of Orwell's narratives and the fraught attempt to tell enlightened stories about human social and political "nature."

To begin to be a bit more specific, for the Western European authors I will examine, the ebbs and flows of political and intellectual revolution and reaction from the 1840s to the 1940s and the attendant instability of any seemingly secured political or intellectual order were a formative context for their work, and not simply at the level of available thematic materials. The struggle with contingency manifested itself in efforts to offer a compelling organizing principle and shape for modern culture and the modern state without conscious or unconscious recourse to the ingrained social and political forms of church and monarchy. 1840 and 1940 are necessarily arbitrary boundaries, but the scenes I examine at the beginning and end of this century-long gap provide usefully explicit juxtapositions of the modern political world and the formation of a modern literature. While any of the selected authors' works can be considered profitably in other contexts—such as that of literary tradition or their own biography—it is difficult to come to terms with what is inadequately referred to as their "modernism" without considering the social, political, and intellectual forces that impinged on their aesthetic projects. Considering this literature as a set of responses to such broader forces produces different and surprising groupings and affiliations than those generated by more conventionally aestheticist classifications, which tend to organize work by levels of perceived formal inventiveness.

Thus, this dissertation begins with a prelude at a key scene for cultural modernity, Karl Marx's and Charles Baudelaire's writings surrounding the democratically-sanctioned demise of

the French Second Republic. And it makes a sustained investigation, in light of the theoretical traditions that have followed upon Marx's and Baudelaire's critical insights, into responses by Walter Benjamin, George Orwell, and Virginia Woolf (among others) to what Bertolt Brecht termed the "dark times" of the late 1930s. The psychic appeal of fascist aesthetics' hygienic purity of form and feeling and the moral appeal of communist aesthetics' righteous instrumentalizations have been extensively commented upon by scholars of modernism and critical theory. I focus instead primarily on the aesthetic predicament of writers working within the frame of a more general European democratic project, whether inflected in the direction of liberalism or socialism, in the immediacy of this historical nightmare of ascendant militaristic totalitarianisms. These writers attempt to reconcile the bedrock post-Enlightenment democratic ideal of aesthetic, affective, and intellectual autonomy with, on the one hand, the persistence of totalitarian patriarchal, nationalist, and racist ideologies that flourish alongside these abstract democratic ideals and, on the other hand, the tendency of the liberal market to neutralize the critical potential of and subvert the conditions for an autonomous art and autonomous self. The nature of the crises are not exactly new—human history is littered with crises of militarism, social instability, and inter-group violence—but the philosophical conditions under which these writers face these crises are. The critical and literary writings discussed in this dissertation represent a range of cultural responses to and engagements with their era's political and ideological contestations, in light of that era's increasingly secular "modern" philosophical framework, what I call in shorthand the (always uneven) embrace of contingency and antagonism.

My principal theoretical insight into these worldly engagements emerges from the surprising cognitive oscillation in these writers between the registers of sex and politics. The

problem of reconciling sexual antagonism and social antagonism separately or jointly and finding a literature or politics sufficient to such insight is a distinctively modern dilemma that these writers exemplify. After idealisms of self-constitution and idealisms of social-constitution have been jointly eviscerated by the philosophical tradition of a secular modernity, critical and literary engagements with the darkening European political scene in the 1930s consistently refocus attention from the threat political antagonisms pose to the democratic social order to the status of the personal autonomy that that order valorizes, thus recognizing the intertwining, via aesthetic ideologies, of conceptual formalizations of the self and of the social. This is an interconnection pre-figured in Baudelaire, and one no less germane to our present situation. Thus, what unites the otherwise disparate texts considered in this dissertation theoretically is the cognitive oscillation between the registers of sex-domesticity and politics-sociality, their reflection not just on contemporary political life but simultaneously, symptomatically, or synecdochically, as the horizon of ameliorative political possibilities collapsed to a singular, inevitable war, on seemingly marginal or outright trivial concerns of sexual autonomy, sexual equality, and sexual practice.

In particular, I focus on moments in these politically-oriented texts when seemingly insignificant issues of sexuality find themselves on center stage, often posing substantial difficulties for the political-ethical positions offered. This vicissitude points not towards an interpersonal fount of political resolution or amelioration, but rather to a social and political modernity that struggles with a non-foundationalist sense of sexual and domestic human relations. It is this inter-relation of psychology and sociology that I will focus on throughout: how crises of sociological-political understandings lead to reflections on psychological-sexual ones and how psychological-sexual assumptions become uninterrogated axioms for sociological-

political projects. To the extent that theorizations of the political will be considered they will be analyzed primarily in terms of the formal and rhetorical properties of their textual enunciations. Thus, in general, I relate the oscillation between the personal and political in the writers examined to formal and rhetorical incongruities in their works. In the chapters that follow, I will analyze a range of critically acute writers grappling with the darkening political horizon of the 1930s and, from the vicissitudes of their intellectual trajectories and from the responses of those who engage or discipline them, offer a variety of possible affective and conceptual responses to the irresolvable antagonisms, fantastical investments, and symbolic constructs that attempt to come to terms with a world found to be “modern.”

Facets of Contingency: Continuities of this Dissertation

Contingency is such a massively general concept with such general applicability (though no less powerful and necessary to keep a focus on for that) that it is worth spelling out the continuities that will hold this dissertation together. I state these continuities without denying that each of the three parts presents self-standing analyses, that each of them is a discrete critical engagement, that each is a contingent outgrowth of some original plan of writing that only retrospectively and with some effort can be narrativized, as I will attempt further below, as an accumulative argument. Despite this, these discrete analyses do share certain methodological, thematic, and theoretical features that motivate their organization under the rubric of “The Aesthetics of Contingency.” Each of the parts of this dissertation touches upon in major or minor ways the following:

- 1) Baudelaire. Without it being planned, Baudelaire has become the central figure of this dissertation, standing almost as a metonym for a “modern” understanding of sexuality,

antagonism, and contingency. Part One considers his aesthetics of contingency directly, primarily as elaborated in his criticism of the Parisian art scene and in his reflections on the rise and fall of the French Second Republic. Part Two focuses on Walter Benjamin's tendentious misreadings of Baudelaire, examining in the process several of the latter's lyrics and concluding with a close reading of his "The Swan." I consider the ethical and aesthetic implications of Baudelaire's paradoxical secular oracularity, his effort to dramatize imaginatively the melancholic limits of human imagination. Part Three touches upon the surprising submerged Baudelairean strand in Orwell's fictions, treating the recurrence of Baudelaire's texts and themes as an ongoing minority report against the novels' more official liberal pastoralism, a report that significantly complicates received understandings of Orwell's stalwart political commonsensicalness. And in the Conclusion, I celebrate the political and aesthetic insights of the great Baudelairean Virginia Woolf, who alike faces unflinchingly the wayward effects of antagonism and contingency in sexual and political affairs.

2) Liberalism and socialism. These political ideologies are two interwoven strands of post-foundationalist national politics, and arguably the two most influential attempts to formalize in political structures understandings of society as a contingent development (as opposed to as a reflection of a divine or natural plan). Both equally, however, fail to shake their idealistic or pastoral groundings. In Part One, I consider Marx's analysis of an impasse in socialist prophecy, one that aligns his frustrations with those of liberal democrats. In Part Two, I consider Benjamin's nostalgia for a simpler form of life, a nostalgia that derails the trajectory of his putatively socialist analyses. I also note in passing how such a nostalgia is characteristic of many other Marxist thinkers, such as Theodor Adorno and Fredric Jameson, who turn to capitalism to explain fully the psychological and social ills of the contemporary world. In Part Three, I take

Orwell as typical of a liberal tradition that sees itself as escaping the ideological illusions of the Marxist allegorization of class structure. Orwell himself, however—like many liberals—is not free of a foundational vision of social life and social relations. In the Conclusion I consider a figure who for many contemporary theorists represents a third way into genuine politics, Carl Schmitt. Yet he too at his core sustains a naturalized sense of community of friends.

3) Despair. It is undeniable that a world without metaphysical supports commonly generates, on the whole and across the political spectrum, despair about the lack of the significance of human endeavor and despair about the highly equivocal accomplishments and trajectory of human civilizations. I relate this strongly to the often uninterrogated idealistic cores of otherwise supposedly “modern” understandings, and to the general problem of abiding an understanding of the world as innately contingent and consequently antagonistic in its developments. I do not, however, take such despair as necessary, and offer these analyses as a possible means of anatomizing and obviating its sources. In Part One I highlight Marx’s and Baudelaire’s shared despair over the popularly-sanctioned failure of the Second Republic. In Part Two I consider Benjamin’s sometimes “socialist,” sometimes apocalyptic despair over the popularly-sanctioned rise of commodity culture and political fascism. In Part Three I consider Orwell’s “liberal” despair, particularly in the bleak endings of his novels, over the rise, spread, and stubborn persistence of various forms of political authoritarianism. And in the Conclusion I turn to, in Woolf, a model for a more multifarious and more complex affective disposition towards the thrall of contingency and antagonism.

4) Literary Criticism. Perhaps the least explicit continuity, but the one most relevant for an English dissertation, is my focus on criticism itself as a genre that struggles to keep faith with the contingent specificity of the cultural objects it engages. In many ways, literature may be

taken as the contingent discourse of modernity par excellence. Having touched upon the formal habits of lyric and narrative, the literary critical analyses that follow in these pages attempt to model ways to read lyric and narrative in a manner that does not disguise their status as textual constructs, reflections of ingrained habits of thought, and as always inadequate formalizations of the contingencies of the world they would represent. I also focus, primarily in my footnotes, on critiquing critics who take literary texts as something more naturalistic or sanctified. In Part One I endorse a particular theoretical tradition of relating literary aesthetics and politics as cognate formalizations. In Part Two I consider Benjamin's failure to read the rhetorical and figurative stratagems of Baudelaire's lyric utterances. In Part Three I consider many critics' inability to read the narrative, and thus ideological, complexity of Orwell's double plots. In the Conclusion, I attempt to model a method of reading that moves beyond the limitations of working within conventional literary-critical periodizations.

Summary of the Chapters

PART ONE: "Coordinating Private and Public Contingencies." I begin in Second Republic France at the convergence of one of the first crises of the era of liberal democracy and (arguably consequently) one of the inaugurating moments of literary modernity. Karl Marx and Charles Baudelaire were both enthusiastic proponents of the socialist revolution of 1848 in France and deeply disillusioned observers of its dissolution in Napoleon III's democratically-endorsed coup. Marx and Baudelaire's modernism can be marked by their insusceptibility to both moral categories of "good" and "evil" and to teleological schemes such as "the fall of man" to make sense of their observations. Instead, in their writings on the events of 1848 and after, we can see clear formulations of the complexity of social antagonism, understood as the result of

multitudinous contingent factors that distort neat narratives of social behavior and human history. Yet, in their search for new concepts adequate to the complexity of these experiences, Marx and Baudelaire struggle against their own ingrained habits of Manichean and teleological thinking. Both writers thus offer the beginnings of a psychology suitable to explaining these seeming irrationalities of behavior.

In the first chapter, “Modernity, Contingency, and Political Aesthetics: Marx on 1848, Le Bon, Sorel, Freud, Žižek, and others,” I examine how Marx’s polemic *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* comprehends the mass’s actions by decentering rational economic interest as the prime mover of social change, instead recognizing arational ideological identifications and phantasmatic psychic consolidations as central to political psychology and behavior. Given this insight, Marx’s indisputably stunning demonstration of Bonaparte’s mediocrity becomes a rationalist irrelevance. More relevant is Marx’s recognition that rhetoric (as in Bonaparte’s repeated chants of “property, family, religion, order”) is ideology’s medium, a recognition that bears a significant challenge to polemic’s efficacy and a significant charge for literary writing. Marx learns that social behavior is prone to the contingent vagaries that shape individual and mass psychology, and perhaps no less to contingent vagaries of geographic, social, and climatological contexts, making engagements with political antagonisms not the attentive shepherding of a mostly predictable progression of events but rather the management of contingent and antagonistic forces. Such an awareness of contingency and antagonism poses a serious challenge to programmatic, teleological, or theological historiographies, a challenge that Marx mostly evades with his provisional explanation imputing the revolution’s failure to, among other factors, a revolutionarily recalcitrant urban lumpenproletariat and poorly-enlightened rural peasants. I trace the development of this thought up to the 1930s in the social theory of Gustave

Le Bon, Georges Sorel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Wilhelm Reich, and then consider the contemporary elaboration of the tie of psychic contingencies and political contingencies in the work of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Slavoj Žižek. Along with expounding these three thinkers' confident prescriptions for successfully radical political formulations and forms, I briefly consider a series of cautions from contemporary critical theorists, such as Wendy Brown, Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, and Jacqueline Rose, about such sanguinity when dealing with innate social and psychic antagonisms.

In the second chapter, "Modernity, Contingency, and Literary Aesthetics: Baudelaire on 1848, de Man, Rancière, and others," having established the ways in which the formalization of contingency becomes central for social and political theory, I turn to Baudelaire's critical writings, including "The Painter of Modern Life" (1859), to demonstrate how such concerns become equally central for literary theory. I argue that Baudelaire's particular social insights are predicated upon or enabled by his un-idealized insights into sexual relations. And both are tied to an aesthetic that equally eschews the possibility of somehow divining organic symbols pointing to essences in favor of the provisional and contingent adjustment of concepts constructed to suit the vagaries of the moment, an aesthetic that deprecates the conventional and sets as a challenge the unwinnable struggle to achieve a language commensurate with actual experience. The key term that emerges for a Baudelairean aesthetics, sexuality, and politics is "contingency": contingency both in personal histories and macrohistorical unfolding. This sense of the thrall to contingency does not, however, equate to nihilism, even if it does generate an unavoidable existential despair in Baudelaire (and no less in many of the other modern thinkers I pursue in subsequent chapters). Rather, an embrace of contingency highlights the need for radically new kinds of aesthetics and ethics. I note both how Baudelaire's rhetoric projects these aesthetic

insights into the political sphere, and how much their trenchancy owes to equally trenchant insights into sexual relations in his lyric poetry, suggesting, if not fully lighting, a path to a trenchant account of social-political ideologies and antagonisms. Here I consider some contemporary extensions of this Baudelairean insight into literary aesthetics, by considering elements of Jacques Rancière's and Paul de Man's insights into the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics, insights that reveal literature and politics as in many ways cognate formalizations.

Thus, Marx and Baudelaire together generate terms to formalize the modern writer's understanding of the psyche and the social world. The following chapters jump ahead to the 1930s to track developments—in another time of great political instability—that modern thought like Marx's and Baudelaire's has undergone, and to highlight various ways that cultural producers and critics have come to understand and abide contingency and antagonism.

PART TWO: "The Resistance to Contingency." In the third chapter, "Messianism and the Decrepitude of Modernity: Contesting the Aesthetics of Phantasmagoria in Benjamin," I offer a critical account of Walter Benjamin, who casts a long shadow over twentieth- and twenty-first-century critical theory and cultural studies and presents a significant obstacle towards grasping the intertwining of modernity and contingency. I consider him as exemplary of one common form of leftist reaction to modernity, one that falls into a nostalgia for the past (of a kind that Engels offers in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*) and not a full engagement with the existential crisis of the present (of a kind that Baudelaire intimates). This spiritualist tradition of the left forsakes the responsibility to further insights into the contingent formation of society and instead bases its efforts upon the recovery of an idealized vision of

society and culture, as if contingency and antagonism (since part of the conceptual reformulations of the modern world) were actually afflictions specific to the modern world.

Benjamin's work in the 1930s is animated by a sense of dislocation within a deteriorating political scene. I follow Benjamin's thought from his early study of seventeenth-century German drama, *The Origin of the German Mourning Play* (1928), to the early drafts and proposals, including the first exposé "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (1935), for his research project on the arcades of nineteenth-century Paris. I clarify both the messianic theory of history and the mystical theory of cultural interpretation that underlies all this work. I argue that since Benjamin refers his historical and cultural analyses to unseen metaphysical perspectives and secreted transcendental meanings, these analyses generate only bewildered despair in confronting the culture of modernity. The result is a reification of the commodity world that Benjamin denigrates, since without a serious interest in the contingent psychological, political, and economic forces that shape and sustain it, its persistence comes to seem like a dark magic. This chapter also comments on how often contemporary proponents of Benjamin replicate, in their uncritical engagements with him, the same anti-modernist modernism. Where they would offer tools of social analysis, they merely demonstrate an inability to think through modernity not as a new type of human existence but rather as a new understanding, a new paradigm, of an essentially unchanged human existence. And it highlights a tradition of more genuine critical engagements with Benjamin's thought by Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Hans Robert Jauss, Fredric Jameson, and Jacques Derrida, among others.

In the fourth chapter, "Baudelaire without Benjamin, Lyric without Oracularity: An Ethics and Aesthetics of Contingency," I investigate how Benjamin's attempt to chart a historical etiology for social and political maladies narrows overdeterminedly on a reading of Baudelaire.

The poet becomes both the dominant figure in the research archive Benjamin compiled for the “Arcades” project and the sole subject of the first monograph projected in its fruition. That Benjamin aspires to interpret the grand movements of history and society yet finds himself employing a poet whose most notable insights are into perversion and fantasy is a significant programmatic contingency that he does not elaborate upon. I assess Benjamin’s analyses in two drafts of his essay on Baudelaire (1938, 1939) in light of his more explicit statements on history, politics, and aesthetics in the texts that I discussed in the previous chapter. That Benjamin’s engagement is abortive, alternately instrumentalizing and disciplining Baudelaire, entirely disregarding signature aspects of his poetics and thematics, foregrounds the fundamental irreconcilability of their respective aesthetics. In particular, the transcendental idealism underwriting Benjamin’s formal bricolage severely restrains its adequacy to the mundane crises he addresses.

I argue that Benjamin’s texts, with their axiomatic nostalgia for a once and future experiential and relational wholeness, disregard Baudelaire’s challenge to such redemption and evade the quandaries and contingencies of temporal autonomy, just as his criticism evades the figurative and semantic complexity of Baudelaire’s verse. The keystone of this analysis is a close comparative reading distinguishing the immanent melancholy (born of an awareness of historical contingency) in Baudelaire’s “The Swan” (1860) from the transcendent melancholy (born of an ideology of historical decline) in the aphorism inspired by Klee’s “Angelus Novus” in Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” (1940). I argue that in “The Swan” the unassuageable melancholy of unfulfillable individual desire becomes the key to abiding the unassuageable losses experienced in the movement of human history. Instead of building on Baudelaire’s insights, Benjamin expends an unusual amount of energy in chastising the poet. Even as

Benjamin is somehow drawn to the strength of Baudelaire's stagings of erotic antagonisms, he recoils from them because of their replacement of a supposedly pure eros with mere sex, again mistaking a modern insight into human sexuality as insights into a (degraded) modern sexuality.

PART THREE: "Contingency and/as Liberty." In these two chapters, I trace a strand of George Orwell's political thought through the decade of the 1930s and beyond, again focusing on the relay between sexual and political concerns.

In the fifth chapter, "Some Versions of Pastoral in *Burmese Days*: Orwell, Empson, and Narrative without Naturalism," I argue that the relatively neglected *Burmese Days* (1934), Orwell's first novel, provide important insights on the structure of liberal thought, which in various guises is the common sense of the modern western world. The supposedly sober Orwell surprises with the consistent tropism of political problems in his critical and literary work toward sexual solutions. I rely on narratological concepts from William Empson and Mieke Bal, who both provide valuable accounts of the ideological implications of formal features of narrative texts. From Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935) I borrow the concept of "double plots" to chart the ways, via a very close reading of the narrative structure of *Burmese Days*, in which a sexual plot and a political one operate in an uneasily parallel manner in that novel, insinuating the kinds of "queer connections" that Empson detects in the double plots of early modern drama. From Bal I borrow an interest in the importance of following the interactions of descriptive, narrative, and argumentative elements of a text to understand its full ideological effects, especially as a corrective to the common critical undervaluation of both Orwell's romance plots and his scenic-pastoral imagination, both of which feature as a consistent backdrop to the sordid urban-political contestations at the heart of his novels. In *Burmese Days*, I argue that even as the domestic idyll energizes the political struggle, when antagonism shatters the domestic idyll, the

political struggle is fully disarmed, indeed enveloped in despair. This suggests a certain aporia of liberalism that would make itself radical, or perhaps a tear in liberalism between its complacent and radical perspectives.

In the sixth chapter, “Liberalism and the Despair of Modernity: Contesting the Orwellian Double Plot of Self and Society,” I investigate critical debates on Orwell’s political vision, starting with Terry Eagleton’s failure, in his putatively ideological reading, to grasp the ideological implications of *Burmese Days*’ double plot structure. Eagleton simplistically attributes the political despair of the text simply to the biographical Orwell’s class position. In contrast, I go on to read this recurrent Orwellian despair two ways: first, via two critics, Christopher Hitchens and Amanda Anderson, who attempt to rehabilitate liberal cultural politics, and then via my own analysis of the submerged Baudelairean themes and intertexts that accompany moments of despair in Orwell’s works, including in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), and that highlight the uninterrogated sexual correlates to Orwellian protagonists’ liberal politics. Finally, I investigate competing interpretations, by Richard Rorty and Raymond Williams, of the liberalism of *1984* (1949), arguing that both their accounts perpetuate the split between public and private forms, a kind of double plot, that proves so debilitating for Orwell’s protagonists: that is, an insistent postulation of a clean conjugal sexuality as both at the core of a vision of a free society and an autonomous individual and as the only respite from political struggle entails—beyond an insensibility to domestic antagonisms—a despair for progress in political relations that do not offer such ideal outcomes. Orwell’s narratives thus disclose an aporia at the heart of a liberalism that would make its idealisms radical.

CONCLUSION: “Modernity, not “Modernism: Woolf, Schmitt, and Political Aesthetics.” Just as an aspect of my labor in the previous chapter was to situate the non-

“modernist” Orwell within a larger aesthetic-political modernity, in this conclusion I suggest how Virginia Woolf can be equally fruitfully so re-situated. I do so by juxtaposing her work with the Weimar-era legal theorist Carl Schmitt. These two 1930s thinkers, in completely divergent manners, grapple with the problematic metaphysics of communion at the heart of the liberal vision.

The reactionary Carl Schmitt takes the challenge of contingency and antagonism in human affairs quite seriously. Schmitt, a peculiar inspiration for Benjamin’s messianism, provides in *The Concept of the Political* (1932) the simplest temporal resolution for inexorable personal and social antagonisms: trivialize the former and ruthlessly stanch the unpredictable outcomes of the latter. The parliamentary instability of Weimar republicanism leads Schmitt to demand the foundation of an absolute political sovereignty, in paradoxical support of the republic, sustained through the abjection of necessary enemies. Schmitt’s historical vision does not explicitly feature the peaceful villages of an idealized pre-capitalist era that features in both Benjamin and Orwell, but instead is informed by a Hobbesian sense of the brutality underlying all social arrangements. Yet, even as Schmitt clearly sees the problems besetting naïve social and political formalizations, he lacks creative sympathy in imagining solutions, showing no interest in human desires and needs. He can only offer a romance of stability and order predicated upon an uncertain discrimination of “friends” from “enemies,” a scheme modeled upon patriarchal institutions like the Roman Catholic church.

Against this aporetic distinction of an organic community of friends, I expound Woolf’s more trenchant ethical vision of political community, one grounded in her less pastoral vision of sexual and domestic politics. Woolf’s *Three Guineas* (1938) is exemplarily modern because it attempts to conceptualize, however imperfectly, an explicit link between sexual politics and

governmental politics, without recourse to idealized versions of personality-psychology or sociality-nationality. Within the span of three quasi-epistolary responses to a pacifist, Woolf repeatedly shifts focus between the functioning of governments and the functioning of families. Woolf's suggestion that feminism entails pacifism and that a redress of women's exclusion from education and employment stands logically prior to the effort for international peace has generated considerable consternation. I argue, however, that judgments against her naiveté ignore the notable ambivalence underlying her supposed policy propositions. Indeed, she first suggests that political conflict has no directly political solution, since the conflicts of political life mirror and repeat (at a distorting distance and scale) the dynamics of unresolved domestic conflicts. But she then suggests that domestic conflicts have no directly domestic solution, given how readily women entering the public sphere are interpellated by its nationalist and capitalist ideologies. A critique of domestic arrangements is intertwined with a critique of political ones, equally intertwining authoritarianism and antagonism at home and abroad. Crucially, Woolf's feminism saves her from romanticizing pre-modern forms of social organization, given their patriarchal structures. She instead marks the redounding effects of a soft, liberal sexism, and produces a stronger vision of autonomous life, unhinged to a faith in perfect inter-personal communion or perfect social-political belonging. And the itinerary of Woolf's guineas—traversing the artificial conceptual boundaries between the psychic and the political—provides a compelling, arguably Baudelairean, model of the aesthetics and politics appropriate to a modern world.

PART ONE:

Coordinating Private and Public Contingencies

CHAPTER 1:

Modernity, Contingency, and Political Aesthetics:

Marx on 1848, Le Bon, Sorel, Freud, Žižek, and others

The Sociological Dilemma

I start here with a question of initially only recent concern, one which however emerges from a political dilemma whose recurrence is near the theoretical center of this dissertation. The question is posed in the November 4, 2004 headline of the British tabloid newspaper the *Daily Mirror*: “How can 59,054,087 people be so dumb?” (According to the National Archives’ “2004 Presidential Election: Popular Vote Totals,” the final count actually seems to have come out to over 62,000,000 dumb people or just under 51% Dumb-Americans among those who cast ballots.) Further down that *Mirror* front page readers are directed inside for six more pages of coverage of the “U.S. Election Disaster.” The demands of tabloid sensationalism aside, “disaster” hardly overstates the palpable anxiety that news of George W. Bush’s re-election generated in many of the nominally non-dumb stunned by the ironic non-correspondence between, on the one hand, the outcome of a democratic electoral contest based on near-universal suffrage and, on the other hand, what are commonly understood to be core democratic ideals, namely the furtherance of the material and (presumably) non-material interests and freedoms of the broadest strata of this universe of voters.

One way of specifying the failure might be to wonder at the intricate ideological knots that propelled a rather vulgarly obvious agent and beneficiary of large corporate capitalism and neo-imperialistic militarism to power primarily on the backs of culturally reactionary masses who had nearly nothing to gain materially from his policies: another way to say this is that there

are not nearly enough (i.e., 62,000,000) millionaires, billionaires, corporate executives, large stockholders, defense contractors, and other direct material beneficiaries of Republican Party hegemony in this country to rationalize this victory. It is in no way original to note then the sorts of non-material benefits that most of those 62,000,000, in their enthusiastic embrace of their chosen leader, were trading off their own potential economic self-interest for: namely a moral aesthetics rigorously consolidating and aligning the monogamous heterosexual family (against the encroaching hedonism of homosexuality and feminism), patriotic support for the propriety of American involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq (against treasonous cultural and ethnic pluralism and political dissent), and a demand for the supposed re-Christianization of the American state (against pernicious secular relativism).

Under either a liberal, a capitalist, or a Marxist anthropology, these should seem like meager rewards—indeed, utterly non sequitur—for a populace that is supposedly motivated by money in the bank and liberty in the home. And thus this situation presents a central problem for progressive politics to contemplate: how can 62,000,000 people be so dumb? how can a large portion of 62,000,000 people be seduced by the empty rhetoric of values and patriotism delivered by a moral and intellectual cipher? How can the form of a political appeal be more compelling than its content? Still, even if the *Daily Mirror*'s sensational formulation of this paradox—the democratic selection of a president from the furthest reaches of the callously acquisitive wing of the American plutocracy (against a reasonably palatable opponent from the altruistic wing)—gestures toward a fundamental insight into the vexed nature of democratic decision-making, it does not turn out to be a new one.

Indeed, the purported shock of the *Mirror*'s editors might have been tempered, if not outright obviated, by a merely cursory perusal of the rather voluminous library of sociological

and psychological writing and reflection on the nature of liberal democratic institutions and the behavior of the democratic mass. That is to say, even as a consideration of the overdetermination of political behavior by arational ideological factors produces, in the immediate aftermath of such events, reflections alternately enervating, clarifying, depressing, and galvanizing—and tracking the implications of such affective dispositions will feature as an undercurrent in all that follows—ultimately the slightest glance backwards produces a recognition that reactionary and authoritarian swings in the democratic west have an almost cyclical nature to them. Theorists of prior forms of political organization searched no less resolvedly for metaphysical, material, or ideological guarantors of peace and stability, more or less trenchantly confronting their utopian resistance to making a fundamental insight of this seemingly in-built failure of democratic processes.

The investigation of political form is not the subject of this dissertation. I provide not a historical survey of the occurrences of democratic political failures or of the theoretical reflections occasioned by occurrences, but rather explore the resonance that these failures, these remorseless ironies of mass-democratic life, have in literary and critical projects emerging from two representative scenes, the rise and fall of the Second French Republic and the European 1930s. I attempt to suggest the ways that the aesthetics of literary analysis and of political analysis have come, in a certain tradition, to inform each other. In this chapter, I begin with Marx's reaction to the failure of democracy in the Second Republic. I then briefly sketch the development of a theoretical tradition that continues investigation into such political behavior, before turning, in the next chapter, to Charles Baudelaire's rather different thoughts on the Second Republic. This quick march through a political-theoretical tradition before starting the story again with a literary writer is one part of my attempt to suggest that literary modernity can

be most convincingly and usefully grasped via its engagement with a set of concerns equally relevant to a broader political and social modernity, concerns rooted in understandings and experiences larger than the twentieth century. These two chapters of part one establish the theoretical terms that will be pursued in later chapters investigating 1930s writers' attempts to formalize their own understandings of self and society based on their own contemporary political catastrophes.

Marx on 1848: Contingency and Antagonism as a Political Problem

Arguably, the most emphatic, original, prescient, and well-known modern statement of the problem of an undemocratic demos appears in the 1850s in Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In light of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's ascendance-via-plebiscite to the title of Emperor Napoleon III of France in 1852, Marx queries, not at all unlike the *Daily Mirror* headline writers, about "how a nation of thirty-six million can be surprised and delivered without resistance into captivity" (21). Not willing to let such a supposed anomaly disconfirm the predictive force of his political analysis, Marx promises to domesticate the wildness of this political outburst and clearly "demonstrate how the *class struggle* in France created circumstances and relationships that made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero's part" (8). If from today's perspective, *The Eighteenth Brumaire* appears to be an uncannily "untimely meditation," from Marx's it must initially have seemed a matter of urgent immediate import but little long-term consequence for the dialectical unfolding of history.

First, here, a brief account of the events of the Second Republic. In February 1848 King Louis Philippe abdicated when faced with a Parisian mob organized by a radical socialist

opposition restless with limited suffrage, economic scarcity, unemployment, and corruption.¹

The Chamber of Deputies subsequently declared universal manhood suffrage (“an almost unprecedented experiment in that day and one that increased the electorate at a stroke from 200,000 to 9,000,000”) and issued a right-to-work declaration along with new burdensome taxation causing leftists to worry “that universal suffrage under these conditions might produce unpleasant results [and] vainly urge[] postponement of the elections until the new voters could be ‘educated’ as to the virtues of a social republic.” In April 1848 an election for the Constituent Assembly was held with moderates and conservatives sweeping into victory with over 90% of seats. Convening in May 1848, this Assembly eliminated the welfare programs and, faced in June 1848 with worker and student protestors barricading on the streets of Paris (the so-called “June Days”), deployed the Army to quell the uprising, leading to the deaths of 1500 protestors and the arrest and deportation of many thousands more.² Still, even as it failed to appease the demands of socialists and other radical leftists, this moderate-conservative Assembly “produced a constitution that appeared to be the most democratic in Europe. The president of the republic would be chosen for a four-year term by universal male suffrage; a one-house legislative assembly would be elected for three years by the same suffrage.” The infrastructure of a stable republic was firmly planted.

¹ This account is an amalgamation of Marx’s reportage in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*; the chapter on “The Second Empire in France” by Paul Farmer; and the section on “The Second Republic and Second Empire” in the “France” article of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. All quotations in this paragraph and the next are from the latter source.

² On this paradoxical conflict between democracy and equality, T.J. Clark writes in *The Absolute Bourgeois*: “The June Days became a holy war, a battle for civilization; a kind of class struggle, certainly, but one in which the bourgeois firmly believed in his own rectitude, his moderation. *He* was the democrat, and the rebels were in arms against the Republic, against the verdict of universal suffrage” (14).

In December 1848 Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, a nephew of the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, one who had failed in several previous ventures to claim the throne and who had as a member of the assembly “made a poor initial impression,” won the Presidency by a landslide, almost certainly on the strength of the Napoleon name and its promised ability to transcend the ideological gridlock amongst socialists, republicans, and monarchists. As well, some politicians had “backed him for the presidency because they thought him too stupid to rule and thus soon to be shunted aside for an Orleanist monarch.” In May 1849 an Assembly split between a radical minority and a monarchist majority was elected. Over the next two years, Bonaparte appeased monarchists and Roman Catholics, limited suffrage again, restricted the press and public assembly, and “gave the church a firm grip on public as well as private education.” When he was denied an unconstitutional second term, he initiated a long-planned coup d’état on December 1851 (an echo of his uncle’s coup on 18 Brumaire of the First Republic’s revolutionary calendar). Again, demonstrators were killed and arrested, yet his proposed authoritarian constitution was approved by 92% in a plebiscite held under universal manhood suffrage and Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte soon thereafter was declared Emperor Napoleon III of the Second French Empire in December 1852 with the support of 97% of the male populace.

Some immediate questions arise then: How did the radical, democratic fruits of the Revolution of 1848 so quickly and *democratically* facilitate a return first to a conservative bourgeois Second Republic and then to an authoritarian Second Empire? As Marx asks, why even in the early post-Revolution days did “the old powers of society” find “unexpected support in the mass of the nation, the peasants and petty bourgeois,” leading to a situation where on the side of the bourgeois republic “stood the aristocracy of finance, the industrial bourgeoisie, the middle class, the petty bourgeois, the army, the lumpen proletariat organized as the Mobile

Guard, the intellectual lights, the clergy, and the rural population. On the side of the Paris proletariat stood none but itself” (23). Some members of these aligned factions are unsurprising bedfellows (the church and aristocracy for example). But the presence of the “lumpen proletariat” and “the rural population” (i.e., the urban underclass and the peasant poor), among the supporters of first the bourgeois republic and then, in massive numbers, of a President and then Emperor unaligned with their economic interests or social identities, and in opposition to a radical workers’ movement, required some explanation. Marx’s nonce-category of the “lumpenproletariat” is one indication of his conceptual schema’s inability to adequately theorize this discrepancy, of the inadequacy of a formalization of society purely on lines of economic class. Indeed, the category of the “lumpenproletariat” has not regularly been taken as an analytical success, however, being more often critiqued as a glaring lacuna in Marx’s analysis of class.³

Napoleon III’s career’s mockery of attempts to script political outcomes based on a rationalist accounting of the electorate’s “interests” highlights how decisively *The Eighteenth Brumaire* sets the analysis of ideology (“consciousness”) atop the Marxist strategist’s agenda. Such an analysis requires replacing an economically-determinist social psychology with one that can account for overdetermining ideological, i.e., social-psychological, factors that make the behavior of individual actors indeterminable solely by reference to their socio-economic

³ The postulation of proletarians without proper proletarian consciousness seems little more than a theoretical band-aid to cover the gaps in dialectical materialist prophecy. For example, Mark Cowling writes of the category of “lumpenproletariat”: “My analysis of Marx’s main definitions leads me to sympathise with Bovenkerk’s conclusion, based on a wider range of references: ‘In their [Marx and Engels’s] more theoretical works, their definition of the term lumpenproletariat is unclear and inconsistent. Anyone who tries to base further study upon their interpretation of the term will soon be at his or her wits’ end’” (232-233). Cowling’s notes refer back to many additional critiques of the concept of the “lumpenproletariat.”

position.⁴ Marx notes emphatically how “[u]niversal suffrage seems to have survived only for a moment, in order that with its own hand it may make its last will and testament before the eyes of all the world and declare in the name of the people itself: All that exists deserves to perish” (20-21). That for Marx an explanation does not lie in any particularly exceptional qualities of Bonaparte himself is evident in his unrelenting scorn for “the adventurer, who hides his commonplace repulsive features under the iron death mask of Napoleon,” even as the unrelentingness of this scorn seems to betray a worry that his teleological account of the historical unfolding of social formations may need to be re-narrativized to account for the unaccountable popular appeal of the “commonplace” and “repulsive” (17).

Ultimately, Marx’s answer to why these peasants and proletarians did not act in their economic and social self-interest, as both Marxism and capitalism would predict they ought, settles on their lack of sufficient class consciousness:

The small-holding peasants form a vast mass, the members of which live in similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with one another. Their mode of production isolates them from one another instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse. The isolation is increased by France’s bad means of communication and by the poverty of the peasants. [...] In this way, the great mass of the French nation is formed by simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes. In so far as millions of families live under conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is

⁴ On this point, Donald Reid writes, “*The Eighteenth Brumaire* served as a bridge from social history to recognition of the crucial role of ideology, historical memory, and culture in the construction of identities—identities that have autonomy from the economic and cannot simply be translated back into it” (562).

merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organization among them, they do not form a class. They are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interest in their own name, whether through a parliament or a convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented (123-124).⁵

This is an understandable, largely un-theoretical answer: peasants require greater enlightenment about class, both their own class and other classes. It is also perhaps not an incorrect answer: in that far distant future when an ideal education system allows all people the training and time to contemplate critically the multiple contexts that constitute their and others' contingent social-historical position, whether inside or outside the potato-sack, it may well turn out that socialist consciousness would prevail, that a "natural" demand for equality and justice would escape the distortions of "ignorance."

However, Marx, as a good Marxist, is concerned primarily in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* with the ebbs and flows of recent revolutionary history and with extracting from the failures of the 1848 revolution pragmatic lessons for ensuring the success of proletarian revolutions in the foreseeable future. He remains, or requires himself to seem, nominally optimistic that the lack of proper consciousness among the lumpenproletariat and the peasants will sort itself out dialectically since "the revolution is thoroughgoing [...] and] does its work methodically," while

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, glosses Marx's insight as follows. She states that *The Eighteenth Brumaire* posits that "a model of social incoherence—necessary gaps between the source of 'influence' (in this case the small peasant proprietors), the 'representative' (Louis Napoleon), and the historical-political phenomenon (executive control)—implies [...] a critique of the subjectivity of a *collective* agency. The necessarily dislocated machine of history moves because 'the identity of the *interests*' of these proprietors 'fails to produce a feeling of community, national links, or a political organization'" (260). A wayward gesture toward equating the failure of identification, communication, and representation between French peasants and their self-chosen political representatives in Paris with Marx's (as European intellectual) own relationship with African and Asian colonial subjects no doubt motivated Edward Said's misleading deployment of "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" as the epigraph to his *Orientalism* (xii).

remaining vague on the precise mechanism by which this consciousness-amelioration will happen (121). The thought-experiment of recruiting a corps of grassroots Marxist cultural workers to spread across the French countryside to bring those peasants “in stupefied seclusion within [the] old order” intellectually up to date on “the law of their enslavement and pauperization” highlights merely in logistical (the least insuperable) terms the likely, long-term endurance of this consciousness-deficiency (125, 126-127).⁶ Marx does not seem to allow himself to consider the formidable institutional and cultural obstacles that stand between the people and their intellectual “enlightenment.” And he does not allow himself to formalize this social condition in more nuanced terms than “natural bonds” and “individual potatoes.”

Indeed, Marx seems not to fully appreciate the irony that his vision of a successful democratic (as in ideologically committed to the equality of peoples) politics remains about organizing the largest numbers of people for a potentially undemocratic (as in lacking majority support among those peoples) project of the socialist greater good. So, on the one hand he valorizes a noble struggle between competing visions of the good carried out under full bitter awareness that “[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (15). Yet on the other hand and despite this awareness of the nightmare world of social psychology, his rhetoric suggests that unsympathetic electoral results represent not to-be-expected reactions, but rather grotesque aberrations. He does

⁶ The stubborn persistence of the ideological and logistical political problem of aligning mass consciousness with any particular sense of that mass’s material reality is highlighted again in the 1930s by Mohandas Gandhi’s abortive efforts with Indian villages. In a recent biography, Joseph Lelyveld writes of the “sad” story of “Gandhi coming to grips with the reality of the Indian village” as “he’s forced to acknowledge his failure to recruit the corps of self-sacrificing satyagrahis he’d counted on dispatching to the 700,000 villages. He even has doubts about the dozens drawn to his immediate ambit at Sevagram. Here too he speaks of feeling ‘helpless.’” (274, 276).

not pursue the consequences of his insight here that any viable account of political progress needs to consider the powerful constraint of tradition, not in its physically material manifestations, which are easily razed, but rather in its psychological ones as lyric and narrative habits of thought that are far more resistant to revolutionary attack. It is from this rough adumbration of psychic—not tangibly material—constraint that *The Eighteenth Brumaire*'s greatest, even if incomplete, insight about the political impasse that anti-traditionalist movements necessarily encounter emerges.

In considering the flight of these potatoes into the stockpot of conventional political authority, Marx not only notes their disidentification from the slogans and cause of the Paris workers, but also, even if in the mode of sarcastic disdain, the workings of the alternative rhetoric that seizes their and their bourgeois contemporaries' attention:

During the June days all classes and parties had united in the *party of Order* against the proletarian class as the *party of Anarchy*, of Socialism, of Communism. They had “saved” society from “*the enemies of society*.” They had given out the watchwords of the old society, “*property, family, religion, order*,” to their army as passwords and had proclaimed to the counter-revolutionary crusaders: “In this sign thou shalt conquer!” From that moment, as soon as one of the numerous parties which had gathered under this sign against the June insurgents seeks to hold the revolutionary battlefield in its own class interest, it goes down before the cry: “Property, family, religion, order.” Society is saved just as often as the circle of its rulers contracts, as a more exclusive interest is maintained against a wider one. Every demand of the simplest bourgeois financial reform, of the most ordinary liberalism, of the most formal republicanism, of the most shallow democracy, is simultaneously castigated as an “attempt on society” and stigmatized as

“Socialism.” And, finally, the high priests of “the religion and order” themselves are driven with kicks from their Pythian tripods, hauled out of their beds in the darkness of night, put in prison-vans, thrown into dungeons or sent into exile; their temple is razed to the ground, their mouths are sealed, their pens broken, their law torn to pieces in the name of religion, of property, of the family, of order. Bourgeois fanatics for order are shot down on their balconies by mobs of drunken soldiers, their domestic sanctuaries profaned, their houses bombarded for amusement — in the name of property, of the family, of religion, and of order. Finally, the scum of bourgeois society forms the *holy phalanx of order* and the hero Crapulinski installs himself in the Tuileries as the “*saviour of society*.” (25-26)

Apropos, Marx writes in a letter to the publisher of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* on how a rhetorically effective polemic must be both “coarse and *fine*.”⁷ The statements above are certainly both coarse and fine in expressing disdain for the cowardice of the republicans and the delusions of the monarchists. It is worth considering, however, how the same factors that make polemics so thrilling for an audience of believers make them inefficacious in converting the unconvinced.

That is to say, this ironic paean to the potent lure of civic and psychological order, manifest primarily as liberal-economic patriotism and Catholic family values reveals a dual insight on the role of rhetoric in mediating between the psychological and the social. First: people like the order of a naturalized traditionalism. “Order” is not only in the name of the bourgeois parliamentary coalition, “order” is also, as the repetition above dramatizes, the actor

⁷ Marx writes to J. Weydemeyer, “Your article against Heinzen [...] is very good, both coarse and *fine*—a combination which should be found in any polemic worthy of the name” (*Eighteenth Brumaire* 136).

whose role Marx most struggles with or resists defining; “order”—seemingly even more so than “capital”—could provide the insurmountable counter-personification to Marx’s favored protagonist, the “revolution” currently “journeying through purgatory” on its way to an inexorable European triumph (121). “Order”—rather than “progress” or “justice”—most efficiently lightens the psychic weight—the chaotic contingencies—of history, of life, and suggests that social behavior can only incompletely be allegorized as a conflict of economic classes. Marx’s conceptual challenge is to acknowledge a powerful intransigence in the psychic need for organization, one could say formalization, that any successful democratic, much less revolutionary, politics must account for in its theory and rhetoric. Marx notes that just a week before the coup the *Journal des Débats* reports Louis Bonaparte offering his bourgeois audience, to high acclaim, relief from “being constantly disturbed by demagogues” and the “promise” of “tranquility for the future, etc., etc. (Bravo, bravo, a storm of bravos)” (115). A rhetoric of increased antagonism, however noble the struggle, however great the promised awards, appears unlikely to move a popular majority to action.

The second complementary insight: a rhetoric that mobilizes a popular idea of order and tradition can succeed democratically, at least temporarily, even given empirical verifiability of the unsustainability of that order or the fictiveness of that tradition or, even, the likely descent into conflict to sustain it, suggesting the foundational importance of lyrical and narrative fiction itself to “realist” political programs. Thus, if peasants tired of political upheaval were predisposed to accept “the miracle that a man named Napoleon would bring all the glory back to them,” the reason for their allegiance was hardly Bonaparte’s elaborated policy or proven competence for this task, but rather his ability to deploy effectively the persona of the first Napoleon, the historical memory of imperial splendor, and the rhetoric of “order,” to co-opt it

wholesale from the internecine warfare of the bourgeois legislators with the fortuitous aid of an unexpected trade crisis due to “overproduction” but popularly “attributed [...] to purely political causes, to the struggle between parliament and the executive power, to the precariousness of a merely provisional form of state” (124, 109, 108). Add to this a weariness of a long historical experience “of fusion, revision, prorogation, constitution, conspiracy, coalition, emigration, usurpation and revolution” and it is no surprise that “the bourgeois madly snorts at his parliamentary republic: ‘*Rather an end with terror than terror without end!*’” (110). Marx avers that “Bonaparte understood this cry” (110). What Bonaparte offers then is a discourse that links civic order and Bonapartism as a resolution to the inconclusive parliamentary bickering over the form of the new republic, not by one-upping the parliamentarians with the better argument on political organization—which would have made him merely of the chaos—but by simply “reiterat[ing] their own catchwords against them. [...] The party of Order] taught Bonaparte to appeal against the parliamentary assemblies to the people” (38-39). A simplistic, but powerful, political discourse—encoding a compelling narrative of historical progress—aligns with a simplistic, but powerful, psychic tendency, neither representing credibly the antagonisms of social and psychological reality, but having powerful real-world effects, nonetheless.

One of the more cryptic pronouncements of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* can even be read as Marx coming to terms with the trumping of supposed material necessity or raw political will by ideology: “In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead. There [earlier revolutions] the phrase went beyond the content; here [nineteenth-century proletarian revolutions] the content goes beyond the phrase” (18).⁸ Marx

⁸ Jacques Derrida, in *Specters of Marx*, treats “content” outpacing “phrase” as Marx’s vision for a future revolution not a diagnosis of the current one’s failure, claiming that Marx claims that next time “the inadequation will stem from the *excess* of its ‘own content’ with regard to the ‘phrase.’ The ‘own content’ will no longer frighten, it will not hide itself, driven back behind the bereaved rhetoric of antique

provides an extended demonstration of the performative efficacy of the Roman appropriations (“phrases”) of the First Republic, ironically juxtaposing its rhetorical accomplishments against its far more limited political accomplishments (“content”). He reproaches the most recent revolutionary effort oppositely. While lauding its political ambition (“content”), he admonishes the “confused mixture of high-flown phrases and actual uncertainty and clumsiness” and “the most motley mixture of crying contradictions” in its pronouncements (“phrase”) (15, 43). Marx thus appears to signal an understanding of politics as an amassment of keywords into strategic phrases—savvy formalizations of the social-political situation—as much as paving stones into strategic barricades. He places an injunction on the future proletariat, presumably the revolutionaries of the second half of the nineteenth century, to match “phrase” with “content,” to “assimilate[] the spirit of the new language” into their labors (22). Yet, in this call for a “new language” we can hear Marx’s hope that an authentically proletarian “phrase” can be found and uttered. That is to say, his developing recognition of the power of political rhetoric, goes hand in hand with rhetoric’s deprecation as a seductive evasion of reality, a bad language for a bad task, a fiction offered where the truth is needed. In the next chapter I will return to the persistence of fiction.

“Phantasmagoria,” a term that does not hide its faith in a correct perception, enters Marx’s lexicon to deal explicitly with this problem. Marx had employed this unlikely term

models and the grimace of death masks. It will exceed the form, it will break out of the clothes, it will overtake signs, models, eloquence, mourning” (115). My reading rests, first, on the tense change from “must let” to “goes” and, primarily, consistency with Marx’s critical diagnosis not of errant motives, methods, or goals by the 1848 proletariat (in whose efforts Marx sees “indicated the general content of the modern revolution”) but of an empirical lack of a social body responsive to revolution’s address (“a content which was in most singular contradiction to everything that, with the material available, with the degree of education attained by the masses, under the given circumstances and relations, could be immediately realized in practice”). Derrida does not mark Marx’s shift of frequency in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* away from *The Communist Manifesto*’s confident, prophetic “metaphysical ontologization” (to use Žižek’s phrase) of revolutionary content (“Specter” 27). Though ultimately I am doubtful that such eccentric phrasings can bear the weight of extended philosophical ruminations.

several times in the 1840s and 1850s to emphasize others' confused, imaginary conceptions of actual material conditions. An emphatic instance from *The Eighteenth Brumaire*:

The Constitution, the National Assembly, the dynastic parties, the blue and the red republicans, the heroes of Africa, the thunder from the platform, the sheet lightning of the daily press, the entire literature, the political names and the intellectual reputations, the civil law and the penal code, the *liberté, égalité, fraternité* and the second Sunday in May 1852—all has vanished like a phantasmagoria before the spell of a man whom even his enemies do not make out to be a sorcerer. (20)

That is, the republicans discover their most cherished ideologies to have been utterly imaginary and powerless overlays on French political and economic reality. In the first volume of *Capital* (1867), there is a more famous instance of “phantasmagoria.” Marx defines commodity fetishism as “nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the phantasmagorical form of a relation between things” (165).⁹ As in the rhetoric of the republicans, “phantasmagoria” locates a site of confused perception needing ideological demystification.¹⁰

There subsists in Marx a striving toward a linguistic correspondence to reality, a faith in the possibility of an eventually unblinkered, non-phantasmagoric statement of the human condition, one undistorted by the superstructural occlusions of ideology. This realist theory of

⁹ I have modified the translation. Looking ahead to Part Two, it is undoubtedly from this passage that Walter Benjamin, about half a century later, plunders the term from Marx.

¹⁰ *The Holy Family* (1845) provides an interesting corollary to the usage in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. Marx and Engels warn against treating a materially real situation as mere ideological epiphenomenon: “But as those *practical* self-alienations of the mass exist in the real world in an outward way, the mass must fight them in an *outward* way. It must by no means hold these products of its self-alienation for mere *ideal phantasmagorias*, mere *alienations of self-consciousness*, and must not wish to abolish material estrangement by purely *inward spiritual* action” (translation modified, IV.1.a). Other usages include in an article of 1842; two references in *The German Ideology* (1846); in a letter of 1846; and in an article of 1850.

representation has a significant influence on Marx's theorization of social relations and social conflicts, influences that I will not trace any further. For my purposes what is of chief interest is that even if Marx thinks that in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* he has merely clarified a detour on the path to proper consciousness raising, we can understand this work as helping to inaugurate a theoretical tradition that Marx may not have anticipated, one that centers on the psychological behavior of the democratic mass and the reality effects of fiction, tying both through the common frame of aesthetics as the study of formalizing contingency.

Political-Theoretical Elaborations on Contingency and Form: Le Bon, Sorel, Freud, Žižek

It is not surprising that a sociological literature emerges in the decades after the eventual demise of the Second Empire (and various other mid-century revolutionary failures), the time during which the Third Republic and various other consolidating European nation-states attempt to make sense of their own precarious secular liberal democratic foundations.¹¹

Among the earliest and most influential contributions to this literature is Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895). In his Preface, Le Bon makes it clear that the challenge for this modern sociology is to bring analytical order to the functioning of a "society" that can no longer be conceptualized as an organic whole or orderly and predictable collection of complementary parts. He states that "[t]he complexity of social facts is such, that it is impossible to grasp them as a whole and to foresee the effects of their reciprocal influence"

¹¹ Particularly telling scenes in this struggle were the flare-ups surrounding the conviction of Alfred Dreyfus. In an overview of recent scholarship on the centrality of the Dreyfus Affair for French society and politics, "How to Understand the Dreyfus Affair," Robert Gildea notes how the affair foregrounded antagonism over the foundation of the nation: "After 1870, of course, France was a republic that set about removing the influence of the Church in education. As a restoration of the monarchy looked increasingly unlikely, defenders of the old order put their faith in the Catholic Church and in the army, whose officers defended the same values of order, hierarchy, and tradition. / The Dreyfus Affair gave an unexpected opportunity to Catholics and militarists to attack the Republic" (43).

(6). Instead of this conceptually apprehensible whole, Le Bon instead figures society as a troubling ocean of imperceptible contingencies. To him “[i]t seems [...] that behind the visible facts are hidden at times thousands of invisible causes. Visible social phenomena appear to be the result of an immense, unconscious working, that as a rule is beyond the reach of our analysis. Perceptible phenomena may be compared to the waves, which are the expression on the surface of the ocean of deep-lying disturbances of which we know nothing” (6). The recognition here that any adequate sociology of mass behaviors requires a cogent psychology of not necessarily consistent individual motivations—an apprehension glimpsed in Marx—is central to modern thought and literature.

Le Bon does not position himself as a disinterested observer of the social ocean, but rather as one who despairs of means to alter its overwhelming flows. For him, the need for a sound social-psychology is urgent because of his distress at modern social phenomena, even though he does not necessarily believe that such an understanding can greatly alter the tendencies expressed by these phenomena. He writes of the difficulty of effecting social change:

the most attentive observation of the facts of history has invariably demonstrated to me that social organisms being every whit as complicated as those of all beings, it is in no wise in our power to force them to undergo on a sudden far-reaching transformations. Nature has recourse at times to radical measures, but never after our fashion, which explains how it is that nothing is more fatal to a people than the mania for great reforms, however excellent these reforms may appear theoretically. (4)

As a reactionary partisan of tradition and order, the waywardness of past attempted radical reforms seems to signal for Le Bon the necessary failure of all efforts at reformism. Indeed, his

analysis of contemporary mass behavior is colored entirely by a nostalgic vision of an ordered society free from such “fatal” movements:

The present epoch is one of these critical moments in which the thought of mankind is undergoing a process of transformation. Two fundamental factors are at the base of this transformation. The first is the destruction of those religious, political, and social beliefs in which all the elements of our civilisation are rooted. The second is the creation of entirely new conditions of existence and thought as the result of modern scientific and industrial discoveries. / The ideas of the past, although half destroyed, being still very powerful, and the ideas which are to replace them being still in process of formation, the modern age represents a period of transition and anarchy. (13-14)

Despite the fact that conservatives of every previous age have felt the same, for Le Bon, the expression of antagonism is a uniquely modern phenomenon. That is, in speaking of religion as the natural soil in which our being-destroyed civilization is rooted and of modern life as characterized by “entirely new” and destructive forces, his thought takes social antagonism as created by modernity, and anarchy as incited by modern conditions. The paradigm shift is narrated as a kind of fall.

For these reasons, Le Bon is not in a position to offer a compelling psychology, of the modern world or otherwise, since any such psychology would have to escape such historically-particularist thinking. *The Crowd* mostly records fear of the masses and worries over their possible control. Le Bon says apocalyptically that “[t]o-day the claims of the masses are becoming more and more sharply defined, and amount to nothing less than a determination to destroy utterly society as it now exists, with a view to making it hark back to that primitive communism which was the normal condition of all human groups before the dawn of

civilisation” (16). In equally dire tones, he offers that “[a] knowledge of the psychology of crowds is to-day the last resource of the statesman who wishes not to govern them—that is becoming a very difficult matter—but at any rate not to be too much governed by them” (19). This is all in keeping with an all-too-recurrent conservative narrative of decline, in many ways the flip side of the story Marx would tell. The most interesting psychological insight that Le Bon is able to offer returns to his recognition of an unconscious, non-rational basis for crowds’ ungovernability.

In speaking of the limited role played by rationality, Le Bon notes that “it is not with rules based on theories of pure equity that [crowds] are to be led, but by seeking what produces an impression on them, and what seduces them” and that “men never shape their conduct upon the teaching of pure reason” (20, 21). And in his chapter on “Electoral Crowds” he clearly ties these sub-rational workings of democratic masses to rhetoric. In a section heading he wonders, like Marx, “Why working men and peasants so rarely choose candidates from their own class” and promises appositely to address “The influence of words and formulas on the elector” (175). In this section, he notes the pernicious efficacy of socialist rhetoric: “An orator who knows how to make use of these means of persuasion can do what he will with a crowd. Expressions such as infamous capital, vile exploiters, the admirable working man, the socialisation of wealth, etc., always produce the same effect, although already somewhat worn by use. But the candidate who hits on a new formula as devoid as possible of precise meaning, and apt in consequence to flatter the most varied aspirations, infallibly obtains a success” (177). Le Bon conceives this final thought in a mood of such anxiety over the leveling of social hierarchies that he does not allow himself to pursue a more complex account of political rhetoric (one that could, for example,

account for the numerous socialist electoral failures in his own recent history, failures that militate against his phobic account of social leveling).

Georges Sorel, writing *Reflections on Violence* (1908) about a decade after Le Bon's *The Crowd*, approaches similar problems, but from an ideological perspective sympathetic to the conditions of modern masses and not tainted by a nostalgia for past wholeness and stability. At this stage of his intellectual career, Sorel's thought does not take religion or any other social system as a natural bedrock of order. He is critical of the tautological thinking behind such originary claims: "The scholastic doctrines of natural right contain nothing but this simple tautology—what is just is good, and what is unjust is bad; as if in enunciating such a doctrine we did not implicitly admit that the just must adapt itself to the natural order of events" (16). Instead of the illusory stability of a social system founded upon natural right or divine order, in the introductory "Letter to Daniel Halévy," Sorel insists upon the necessity of philosophy acknowledging the persistence of seemingly inbuilt barriers to society's realizations of its ideals. He calls this attitude "pessimism" and defines it as "quite a different thing from the caricatures of it which are usually presented to us; it is a philosophy of conduct rather than a theory of the world; it considers the *march towards deliverance* as narrowly conditioned, on the one hand, by the experimental knowledge that we have acquired from the obstacles which oppose themselves to the satisfaction of our imaginations (or, if we like, by the feeling of social determinism), and, on the other, by a profound conviction of our natural weakness" (10). We can recognize Sorel's "pessimism" as a kind of historically-minded existentialism, an awareness of the seeming intractability of certain aspects of human relations, versions of antagonism. Even though he is not susceptible to it, Sorel brings attention to the role that has been played by religion in managing such fraught relations: "Religions constitute a very troublesome problem for the

intellectualists, for they can neither regard them as being without historical importance nor can they explain them” (25). Sorel, for his part, attempts to use an analysis of the appeal of religion to construct his alternative foundation for action.

Because of his receptiveness to the potential of the present, Sorel is able to take his insights on religion’s appeal and Le Bon’s observations on people’s susceptibility to rhetorical manipulation further, making such susceptibility the lynchpin of his theory of productive social transformation. He offers a modern myth, making clear that a myth is not a rationally-determined program. He admits that “[m]any will reproach me for not having given any information which might be useful for tactical purposes; no formulas, no recipes” (48). Instead of the elaborated formulas and policies of a political party, Sorel offers to captivate the attention of workers with the simplicity of the singular organizing idea of a general strike: “Parties, as a rule, *define* the reforms that they wish to bring about; but the general strike has a character of *infinity*, because it puts on one side all discussion of definite reforms and confronts men with a catastrophe” (27). Unlike socialist analyses’ tendencies toward endless partisan debate and ongoing theoretical refinement, “myths are not descriptions of things, but expressions of a determination to act” (32). Their defining characteristic is an absence of reasons, replacing these with forms that we can recognize as compelling lyric and narrative fictions.

This energizing emptiness is exactly myth’s advantage, for Sorel, over any highly prescriptive Utopia: “A myth cannot be refuted, since it is, at bottom, identical with the convictions of a group, being the expression of these convictions in the language of movement; and it is, in consequence, unanalysable into parts which could be placed on the plane of historical descriptions. A Utopia, on the contrary, can be discussed like any other social constitution” (33). That is, the hyperbolic, one could say literary, fictiveness of a myth, its rootedness in the

“convictions” of psychic fantasy, grants it a conceptual power over the more constrained and paradoxically “realist” ambitions of any well-elaborated utopian “social constitution.” Sorel finds this powerful impetus to movement and action in the rhetoric of the general strike particularly suited for the masses. In his “Introduction to the First Publication,” he sees the mobilization of the mass as the only path to true reform and the use of a powerful, empty signifier as the only path to this mobilization: “Thus there would be two kinds of meliorism: the one [...] which would work with the aid of maxims, half-lies, and supplication to eternal justice; the other proceeds by blows—the latter being the only one that is within the scope of uneducated people who have not yet been enlightened by a knowledge of advanced social economics” (47). Myth offers, for Sorel, the kind of ammunition that can shatter psychological reaction-formations.

Unlike for Le Bon with his nostalgia, modern groundlessness, for Sorel, creates new opportunities for progress. The importance of fictive formalizations to the success of such projects can be seen clearly in those moments where Sorel compares the workers movement to an aesthetic project. On the one hand Sorel claims, in contrast to socialist reformers, “we [...] have invented nothing at all, and even assert that nothing can be invented; we have limited ourselves to defining the historical bearing of the notion of a general strike” (37). On the other hand, however, Sorel refers to enabling conditions, through the general strike, in which workers can refine their skills like artists of earlier eras: “I wished to show how one found in art (practised by its best representatives, and, above all, in its best periods) analogies which make it easier for us to understand what the qualities of the workers of the future would be” (39). This wish to turn artisans into artists is the utopian kernel at the heart of Sorel’s supposedly non-utopian system. It also complicates his wish to offer a theory of pure action.

Art-making, in fact, becomes the model for all radical effort, including ostensibly Sorel's theory of the general strike. Thus, in contradiction of his earlier statement that "nothing can be invented," he goes on to praise "[t]he inventor" as "an artist who wears himself out in pursuing the realisation of ends which practical people generally declare absurd; and who, if he has made any important discovery is often supposed to be mad; practical people thus resemble artisans" (287). In his strongest statement of this aesthetic ideology, Sorel seems to invert his entire theoretical system, so that a pragmatic theory of the general strike of the working masses turns into an idealist theory of post-revolutionary individual creativity: "This striving towards perfection which manifests itself, in spite of the absence of any personal, immediate, and proportional reward, constitutes the *secret virtue* which assures the continued progress of the world" (292).¹² Art becomes, for Sorel, a fictive arena for envisaging and modeling perfections less readily achievable in the real world, but also thus a problematic supplement to his politics. I will turn at the end of the second chapter, in a more systematic manner, to more systematic formulations of the relation between aesthetics and politics, and fiction and reality.

For now I want to emphasize how in Le Bon and Sorel we can see two contrasting views on whether the inevitable recognition of contingency in human affairs (the condition of modernity) is a threat to a previously stable social order (Le Bon) or an opportunity for social reconfiguration (Sorel). We can see a similar split in perspectives in other works sharing a focus on and motivation by the influence of mass movements and demonstrations on the political trajectories of European republics at and after the turn of the last century, such as, to give two brief examples, Friedrich Nietzsche and Georges Bataille. I offer here an extremely limited citation of Nietzsche and Bataille merely in the service of reinforcing two points: 1) the earlier

¹² Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" distorts Sorel's views in taking literally the claim to violence and nihilism and not understanding the productivity of the future to which Sorel was pointing.

point about contingency as the key thematic of modernity; and 2) the wish that a consistent focus on the philosophical problem of modernity disrupts conventional generic and theoretical groupings (Le Bon and Sorel grouped as social theorists of the mass; Nietzsche and Bataille grouped as critical precursors to poststructuralism).

Nietzsche and Bataille both propound a social theory that dislocates any implicit evolutionary paradigm in social history, finding in the mass a brutal primal formation seeking to regressively level society. In this, they sound like versions of Le Bon. However, such a leveling is negatively coded in Nietzsche's account of the French Revolution, in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), in which "the last political noblesse in Europe [...] collapsed beneath the popular instincts of *ressentiment*" (54). And it is positively coded in Bataille's "Popular Front in the Street" (1935), which seeks to release pure, unmediated "emotions that give the human masses the surges of power that tear them away from the domination of those who only know how to lead them on to poverty and to the slaughterhouse" and demands that "[w]e must contribute to the masses' awareness of their own power; we are sure that strength results less from strategy than from collective exaltation, and exaltation can come only from words that touch not the reason but the passions of the masses" (166,167).¹³ Thus, even as Nietzsche shares Le Bon's anxieties about the leveling passions of the mass, Bataille finds, with Sorel, potential to deploy these passions for progressive purposes.

A high point in the genealogy of social psychology is reached with Sigmund Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), a work that begins with an overview of

¹³ It is important to note that much of Nietzsche's critical project is exactly about generating means of personal and social formation without metaphysical foundations or models. Nietzsche provides great insight into the dynamics of self-recreation under such conditions. His insights, however, do not scale well—at least in his own deeply individualistic and exceptionalist formulations—to more general projects of recreating social and political relations.

Le Bon's *The Crowd* and engages throughout with other earlier work in the field.¹⁴ Freud attempts to explain the causes of the behaviors that his sociological predecessors had mostly been satisfied to excoriate or praise, offering to explain the psychological mechanisms which encourage or inhibit potatoes in a sack in developing a sack consciousness, as it were. His answers, based in a psychological model that highlights ambivalence, also go some way towards explaining the deeply polarized attitude expressed towards mass behavior in the preceding sociological literature and provide a foundation for further reflection on the relation between interpersonal antagonisms and those of larger social units. Indeed, Freud's foundational assertion is that group psychology is an extension of individual psychology. Unlike those who perceive a mass of people as a qualitatively different organic entity—one more animal than human—than the individuals who make it up, Freud perceives in the workings of masses mechanisms homologous to those described by his model of everyday individual psychology.

Freud notes that there is no such thing as a hermetically-sealed individual psyche, for “[i]n the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent; and so from the very first individual psychology, in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words, is at the same time social psychology as well” (3). The most likely “someone else”'s being parents and siblings, he argues “that it may be possible to discover the beginnings of [the social instinct's] development in a narrower circle, such as that of the family” (5). By emphasizing the inextricability of individual psychology from its social contexts, Freud's model discredits an understanding of group behavior as an evolutionary regression from the civilizing advances of individuation. In the very beginning of his

¹⁴ Among the better-known works that Freud synthesizes, alongside Le Bon's, are Wilfred Trotter's *The Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War* (1914) and William McDougall's *The Group Mind: A Sketch of the Principles of Collective Psychology, with Some Attempt to Apply Them to the Interpretation of National Life and Character* (1920).

anthropological fable, the “father, chief, or leader” of the primitive horde already epitomized the narcissistic ideal of the unencumbered individual whose “intellectual acts were strong and independent even in isolation, and his will needed no reinforcement from others [...] his ego had few libidinal ties; he loved no one but himself, or other people only in so far as they served his needs” (71). Even though the “members of the group were subject to ties as we see them to-day,” it remains the case that “[i]ndividual psychology must [...] be just as old as group psychology” (71). In positioning the tyranny of narcissism, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically, as an inaugural state, Freud problematizes the vision of an ego-sufficient individual as an ideal developmental endpoint.¹⁵ He likewise suggests that group psychological behaviors are not invariably problematic dehumanizing regressions, since they also represent the first step out of this narcissism.

The common factor that Freud posits as the motive force for both individual and group behaviors is the libido (or Eros), whose workings he has previously excavated in numerous clinical and theoretical investigations. He reasons that “a group is clearly held together by a power of some kind: and to what power could this feat be better ascribed than to Eros, which holds together everything in the world?” (31). Complications arise, for individuals, families, and societies, when the libido seeks outlets outside the secure bounds of the narcissism that defines an individual’s first psychic state. The waywardness of libidinal attachments—the inability to ever fully possess the desired object, the inability often to acknowledge the desired object, the

¹⁵ And incidentally reveals Nietzsche’s overman as in large part an infantile fantasy. This diagnosis is ambivalent, however, and there is more to say about re-activating and actualizing the revolutionary impulse of childhood fantasy, without falling into regressive infantile solipsism. For an evocative extended discussion of these dynamics that in many ways mirrors de Man’s exploration of the regressive aspects of the aesthetic ideology, see Adam Phillips’ *The Beast in the Nursery*. Phillips grounds the impulse to fiction, to the creation of possible worlds, in “children’s sexual curiosity,” writing that “it had to be satisfied, but by a fantasy, a story, as though the child’s instinctual life partly took the form of a hunger for coherent narrative, for satisfying fiction” (14). This tie between the sexual and the aesthetic is an underlying theme of this dissertation.

attachment to objects in fantasy, and the disruptions in all cases that libidinal expenditure poses for the coherence of the ego—makes the inhibition and management of the libido a prerequisite for stable individuation and socialization. Just as in the process of individual development, Freud argues that “[a]ll the ties upon which a group depends are of the character of instincts that are inhibited in their aims” (92). A group, like a family, is not held together by expressed sexual love, but inhibited sexual expression of the same kind as felt in personal relations. And in both cases, the vagaries of libidinal attachments, expressed and inhibited, create complications springing from psychological dispositions that are not qualitatively different.

Freud’s model of group metapsychology, like his individual metapsychology, features the interactions of an ego, an ego ideal, and objects in the external world. Metapsychologies are, of course, given their attempt to formalize the dynamic interactions of diachronic experience and synchronic mental states, aesthetic objects. In the clearest distinction (a clarity that Freud acknowledges is simplifying and ultimately unsustainable¹⁶), the ego is the result of the inhibited libido making identifications with people an individual wants to be like; the ego ideal is the result of the internalization of parental and other authoritarian norms that inhibit most libidinal expression; and the expressed libido attaches to external objects that the individual wants to have. The interplay of these components is central to Freud’s (simplified) Oedipal model of individual (heterosexual male) development, a large part of whose drama is organized around the

¹⁶ For example, on the unstable boundary between the ego and the ego ideal, Freud notes that “[i]t is quite conceivable that the separation of the ego ideal from the ego cannot be borne for long either, and has to be temporarily undone,” often in culturally-sanctioned transgressions. Likewise, he highlights how an individual psyche is a precipitate of a contingent and complex set of incorporations and identifications, involving two parents, perhaps, and many others for sure. On this complexity, Freud writes: “Each individual is a component part of numerous groups, he is bound by ties of identification in many directions, and he has built up his ego ideal upon the most various models. Each individual therefore has a share in numerous group minds—those of his race, of his class, of his creed, of his nationality, etc.—and he can also raise himself above them to the extent of having a scrap of independence and originality” (78). At no point does Freud deny the complexity of his subject.

fact that “[t]he libido attaches itself to the satisfaction of the great vital needs, and chooses as its first objects the people who have a share in that process” (44). In this view, individuation is much more of a positioning among and mimicking of various available external models rather than the creation of an organic personality *sui generis*. Group formations make these psychic operations of idealization and identification extremely palpable.¹⁷ For Freud, in a group “a number of individuals [...] have put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego” (61). Thus what may initially seem in group behaviors like a regression to pre-social personality traits can be seen more properly as an extension of those very psychic mechanisms on which socialization depends. Returning to the fears of a Le Bon, the blind devotion and “animality” seen in groups is just an extension of a commonly disavowed “animal” mimicry integral to “individuation.”

It is true that Freud occasionally uses a conventionally teleological vocabulary, as when he proclaims that “in the development of mankind as a whole, just as in individuals, love alone acts as the civilizing factor in the sense that it brings a change from egoism to altruism” (44). However, it does not take an appeal to the later *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) to understand how uncommitted Freud is to such teleological schemas and how ironic his note of civilization’s accomplishments is. Indeed, what psychoanalysis reveals in the development of the individual is the ego’s strong embrace of idealizations that disavow recognitions of real psychic antagonisms. So, from one undeniable perspective heterosexual monogamy is the endpoint of individual development in psychoanalysis: “Two people coming together for the purpose of sexual satisfaction, in so far as they seek for solitude, are making a demonstration against the

¹⁷ As does the behavior of individuals under hypnosis, a state in which the hypnotized subject willingly “puts the object [hypnotist] in the place of the ego ideal” and which, thus, provides further evidence for the innate tendency toward submissive idealization, even in “a group formation with two members” (96; 59).

herd instinct, the group feeling. The more they are in love, the more completely they suffice for each other” (93). Yet Freud is emphatic on the unwarranted idealism that underlies such a love, as when he cites “Bernard Shaw’s malicious aphorism to the effect that being in love means greatly exaggerating the difference between one woman and another” (93). He goes so far as to place this false idealization at the foundation of society in the practice of “totemic exogamy, the prohibition of any sexual relation with those women of the family who had been tenderly loved since childhood. In this way a wedge was driven in between a man’s affectionate and sensual feelings, one still firmly fixed in his erotic life to-day. As a result of this exogamy the sensual needs of men had to be satisfied with strange and unloved women” (94). This drive to idealize objects that seem to complement and complete the ego, and thus to disavow the actual nature of the underlying desires or drives, even if seemingly beneficent in its romantic guises, equally underlies the often troubling hero worship shown to political leaders.

Freud thus places the roots of political ideology and political conflict squarely within the everyday functioning of the individual psyche. In both individual relations and group formations, the ego chooses identifications and idealizations that absolve it from negotiating the psychically painful discrepancy between fantasy and reality. The most direct empirical proof that Freud offers for such a complex reality underlying psychic and social fantasies is the neuroses. He writes that “[n]euroses are extraordinarily rich in content, for they embrace all possible relations between the ego and the object—both those in which the object is retained and others in which it is abandoned or erected inside the ego itself—and also the conflicting relations between the ego and its ego ideal” (97). The tendency towards unsustainable simplifications in object relations in many ways becomes the true endpoint of development, and religion, as a kind of collective simplification par excellence, becomes its social apogee. Freud admits that in certain contexts

religious idealizations were psychically effective: “Even those who do not regret the disappearance of religious illusions from the civilized world of to-day will admit that so long as they were in force they offered those who were bound by them the most powerful protection against the danger of neurosis. Nor is it hard to discern that all the ties that bind people to mystico-religious or philosophico-religious sects and communities are expressions of crooked cures of all kinds of neuroses.” (95). However, Freud’s modernity emerges most fully in considering the challenge of dealing with psychic and social antagonisms in a secular context, where multiple competing political ideologies—ideological fictions and formalizations of greater or lesser complexity—too readily offer to assuage the ego’s conflicts.¹⁸

On the changed ideological contexts and new antagonisms of modernity that have taken the place of older religious intolerance, Freud notes:

If to-day that intolerance no longer shows itself so violent and cruel as in former centuries, we can scarcely conclude that there has been a softening in human manners. The cause is rather to be found in the undeniable weakening of religious feelings and the libidinal ties which depend upon them. If another group tie takes the place of the religious one—and the socialistic tie seems to be succeeding in doing so—then there will be the same intolerance towards outsiders as in the age of the Wars of Religion; and if differences between scientific opinions could ever attain a similar significance for groups, the same result would again be repeated with this new motivation. (39)

¹⁸ In a reading of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* in her book *Edgework*, Wendy Brown notes how modern political attachment, now not necessarily to actual leaders but as often to “something else iconic of the group,” “produces two very significant, indeed troubling effects for democratic citizenship even as it binds citizens into a nation: first, the attachment achieved through idealization is likely to glory in the *power* of the nation, a power expressed in state action; second and relatedly, because individual ego ideals have been displaced onto the nation, citizenship and patriotism are rendered as both passive and uncritical adoration of this power” (30).

And, most relevantly for my purposes, Freud gestures toward the privileged role that aesthetics plays in the mediation of the individual and society, from earliest times to the present. Even in his originary fable the aesthetic domain worked to enunciate the tie, there an idealized one in the form of myth, between the individual and society: “It was then, perhaps, that some individual, in the exigency of his longing, may have been moved to free himself from the group and take over the father’s part. He who did this was the first epic poet; and the advance was achieved in his imagination. The poet disguised the truth with lies in accordance with his longing. He invented the heroic myth” (87). In the modern world, literature no longer plays such a simple role, as it, like politics and sociology, has had to grapple with the recognition (and not mere disavowal) of innate antagonisms.¹⁹ Even though Freud does not offer here sustained reflections on aesthetics, his tying together of the psychic and the political with the literary and libidinal as mediators provides a level of complexity to social psychology that continues to sustain subsequent discussions in the field. It also provides a basis for generating more complex and useful aesthetic formulations—lyric and narrative—of the relation of self to its society and to itself.

It is worth pausing here to outline more clearly the key theoretical issues in the elaboration of what one could fairly call (and many have) the Marx-Freud synthesis. This project centers on bringing Marx’s particular clarity about social antagonisms in line with Freud’s particular clarity about interpersonal ones. Both thinkers acknowledge the necessary supplement that psyche and society provide for each other. Freud hypothesizes, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Eros and the death instinct as twin drives that motivate all human endeavor, equivalently in the evolutionary phylogeny of the human as a complex multi-cellular organism as

¹⁹ See the brief discussion of Jacques Rancière’s notion of modernity as the “aesthetic regime of art” in the next chapter for a more detailed theoretical consideration of changes in art’s social functions. The discussion of Baudelaire’s aesthetics, also in the next chapter, will also, of course, return to these issues.

in the cultural anthropology of the human as a society-building animal. Both drives condition psychic life and social life in a vicious circle, where the compensatory ideologies of the psyche reproduce and reinforce the ideologies of the social. On the developmental entwinement of the two initially distinct forces, Freud gives as an example how “in sadism, where the death instinct twists the erotic aim in its own sense and yet at the same time fully satisfies the erotic urge,” adding that “even where it emerges without any sexual purpose, in the blindest fury of destructiveness, we cannot fail to recognize that the satisfaction of the instinct is accompanied by an extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment” (81). Freud is clear on how such psychic-sexual insights can and must be extended to the broader study of society. By showing how innate antagonism is to the psyche and consequently to social formations, Freud tempers much of the utopianism of progressives seeking simpler futures and equally tempers the despair of reactionaries bemoaning the loss of supposedly simpler pasts, and provides a basis for critiquing the narratives that underlie such simple visions.

No less clearly, Marx’s collaborator Friedrich Engels’ postulation in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, an elaboration of Marx’s notes, of two irreducibly “determining factor[s] of history” reinforces Freud’s insight (71). Engels finds these factors to be, “[o]n the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species.” The ideologies of domestic-sexual production and social-economic production that underlie these factors operate, as in Freud’s schema, in a mutually reinforcing vicious circle: Engels proclaims the gender roles of the conventionalized heterosexual, monogamous family as “[t]he first class opposition [...] and the first class oppression,” that is, as the cultural correlate of the inequities of the capitalist mode of production

(129). And capitalism, in its turn, reproduces such domestic oppressions. For Engels, “[monogamous marriage] is the cellular form of civilized society, in which the nature of the oppositions and contradictions fully active in that society can be already studied.” In their determination for a revolution more terminable than interminable, Engels and Marx, however, fall into an idealized vision of what a more just relation in both realms would look like. And, in his commitment to philosophical precision, Freud offers little by way of a critique of actually-existing political economy. In both theorizations sexual-psychic and social-political development and struggle are placed in an uncertain congruence, the intricacies of which are left to be charted. However, a common theme in both cases is the centrality of fiction. Thus, I will examine fictional attempts to formalize this congruence in my subsequent readings of Baudelaire, Orwell, and Woolf.

As it is from this marriage of Freud and Marx that the most fruitful recent social-political theories have emerged, I leap now to one particularly fruitful culmination of Freudian-Marxist reflection on the pain of history and society, on the self’s romance with authority, Slavoj Žižek. Žižek’s work relentlessly catalogs the symptoms of ideological distortion or structuration in contemporary politics and culture. In post-structuralist fashion, he views the cultural-Symbolic realm not as pure presence (as an accurate account of reality) neither, given his acceptance of Lacan, as pure difference (a system of signification completely unmoored from reality), but rather as a system of differences that significantly finds itself organized around and occasionally interrupted by crossing-points with the truly Real. Social-symbolic processes are then recognized as ideological not in that they are escapist, “a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality” of which we are all too aware, but rather in their felt concreteness as reality, as “a fantasy-construction [...] structur[ing] our effective, real social relations,” at their

most effective “succeed[ing] in determining the mode of our everyday experience of reality itself,” all in an attempt to “mask[] some insupportable, real, impossible kernel” below (“Specter” 45, 49). This nuanced concept of ideology, fully accepting “reality” as an effect of powerful fictions, allows Žižek to go further than Marx, et al., in understanding the vagaries of mass behavior.

An important feature of Žižek’s thought is the way it revises traditional Marxist psychologies that place antagonism in social conditions entirely external to the individual. Such psychologies assume that the global de-repression and libidinal expressiveness ensuing upon a communist overthrow of capitalist relations will allow for the formation of an untroubled communal consciousness, or alternately that come the revolution love will be fully stripped of its commodity-taint. Engels predicts as much, in *The Origin of the Family*, when he speculates on “the way in which sexual relations will be ordered after the impending overthrow of capitalist production,” looking forward to “a generation of men who never in their lives have known what it is to buy a woman’s surrender with money or any other social instrument of power; a generation of women who have never known what it is to give themselves to a man from any other considerations than real love or to refuse to give themselves to their lover from fear of the economic consequences” (145). In this view, the innate disposition of humans is towards relational communion.

Similarly, Wilhelm Reich in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933, rev. 1946) requires that to solve “the practical problem of mass psychology” (i.e., that “the passive majority of the population [...] always helps political reaction to achieve victory”), we must “eliminate those inhibitions that run counter to the development of the will to freedom born of the socio-economic

situation.²⁰ Freed of its bonds and directed into the channels of the freedom movement's rational goals, the psychic energy of the average mass of the people [...] would no longer be capable of being fettered" (32, 33).²¹ Žižek replaces such conceptions with a more disillusioned Freudian-Lacanian understanding of the self's thrall to innate drives that can find satisfaction only in fantasy, utterly disallowing, given the impediments of the Real, the possibility of achieving neatly symmetrical, simply mutual interpersonal or social relations. The release of capitalism's fetters will not lead to perfect social communion.

Žižek marks the political correlative of his psychology-philosophy in his praise for the radical-democratic "post-Marxism" of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. He states that in this book they "have, so to speak, reinvented the Lacanian notion of the Real as impossible, they have made it useful as a tool for social and ideological analysis" ("Beyond" 249). Analogously to Freud's *Group Psychology*, analytic insights about individual psyches are brought to bear on mass behavior, but in Laclau and Mouffe in an extended discussion grounded in concrete specifics of the current political situation. Žižek characterizes Laclau and Mouffe's concept of "radical democracy" as "a theory of the social field founded on such a notion of antagonism—on an acknowledgement of an original 'trauma', an impossible kernel which resists symbolization, totalization, symbolic integration" ("Specter" 5). Despite the somewhat inflated rhetoric here, Žižek emphasizes the importance of placing a recognition of innate social antagonism at the heart of any viable political philosophy.

²⁰ Both Engels and Reich's idylls are tarnished by their censure of, in Engels' case, "the abominable practice of sodomy" (128) or, in Reich's case, a fascism-prone "passive homosexuality" (163).

²¹ Though his solution is unhelpfully utopian, Reich does provide a cogent recapitulation of the political-psychological problem that Marx had set out in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*: "that the economic and ideologic situations of the masses need not necessarily coincide, and that, indeed, there can be a considerable cleavage between the two. [...] What has to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals [...], but why the majority of those who are hungry *don't* steal" (19).

Such a placement acknowledges the seemingly conclusively dashed utopian hope that—given all the failed revolutions that merely churned up new antagonisms to replace the old—socialist revolution can fully dissolve social antagonism and re-figure society as fully egalitarian. Writing separately, Laclau claims that democracy can never fully “express[] the will of the represented” (“Signifiers” 230). Instead, he offers, with Mouffe, a more strategically limited project of organizing and aligning, formalizing and aestheticizing—various local struggles for social justice under/as the banner of a new democratic hegemony, “a new will, to ensure as much as possible [the represented’s] complicity in all the impurities and unevenness that the process of representation presupposes” (“Signifiers” 230). Essentially this new democratic hegemony is a more flexible, more pragmatic, more rhetorically-savvy version of the general strike: both serve to find a way to rally masses for progressive ends, without predetermined programs, based upon an appeal to the not-entirely-rational appeals of fictive rhetoric and form. And like the call to the general strike, this hegemonizing strategy operates on dispossessed people’s susceptibility to what Le Bon would call “the influence of words and formulas,” the hopefully beneficent power of the aesthetic ideology.

For radical democracy, the words would be the ones with the greatest existing authority and legitimacy in a given political context (characteristically, a liberal democratic one) and the formulas would align varied struggles under such words. The adaptability to specific rhetorical contexts, as opposed to a commitment to a quasi-transcendental symbol like the general strike, marks the difference between his and Mouffe’s approach and Sorel’s. Even though the general strike is “an empty image that galvanizes the consciousness of the masses” (Sorel is explicit that he has no actual past or future strike in mind), Laclau questions its choice as the privileged symbol of the workers’ movement, asking, “why revolutionary general strike rather than

anything else? Is there any ground to think that the general strike is the (necessary) catachresis of that radical nonevent which brings about ‘grandeur’?” (“Politics” 242). For Sorel, “grandeur” refers to the social condition that will replace the decadence that he decries. Laclau, in the idiom of Paul de Man, critiques Sorel’s failure to grapple with the contingency at the heart of his chosen symbol: “The relationship between ‘grandeur’ and general strike is a hegemonic incarnation, which involves all metaphoric aggregation being ultimately grounded in (reversible) metonymic displacements. The attempt to ground the revolutionary will in a metaphoric totalization that would avoid the particularism of hegemonic variations ends in failure” (“Politics” 243).²²

Laclau’s point is that “the answer to the question, What is democracy? cannot be given out of any context. We can only try to hegemonize the democratic chain of equivalences for the type of social arrangement that we defend. Naturally, this can only result in a hegemonic struggle around the signifiers of democracy that would make them even more ambiguous” (“Signifiers” 232). This strategy of re-signifying those historically-empowered terms most attuned to a nation’s aspirations and ideological foundations—like Bonaparte’s aptness for post-revolutionary French society’s desire for “property, family, religion, order”—is essentially a psycho-rhetorical one, acknowledging both the empty conventionality of current definitions (the “*radical impossibility*” as Žižek says of their universal achievement) thus their availability as “ideological raw materials” for the aspirations of future struggles and also the paramount social need to “ensure[] a certain intelligibility of what would otherwise be an entirely irrational situation” (“Specter” 6; “Signifiers” 231, 228). The most powerful rhetoric is the already-authorized kind, that which is so broadly available that it can be used non-rationally to organize all manner of

²² In particular, “failure” here refers primarily to the vagaries of Sorel’s later intellectual career.

desires and anxieties.²³ We cannot choose or engineer a given social situation's privileged symbols and ideology, we can only engage in a struggle to re-signify, or revise, them for progressive ends: a quintessentially aesthetic project.²⁴

I detour here from following this reflection on political theory forward into the realm of socialist strategy: strategy, while of crucial importance, is not the primary focus of this dissertation; instead, on the approach to the particular formations of the literary, I want to isolate the key arenas of “real” psycho-social struggle. Even if, in the broadest possible picture, these struggles are primarily understood to be tears to be mended by theoretically-informed, pragmatic progressive politics and therapeutic psychology, for my purposes these sites of antagonism are important for the political-ideological cast they give to interpersonal relations and the impetus they provide to modern literary creation, which I take characteristically to be searching and non-redemptive discursive accounts of the personal that can support and sustain philosophical reflection. In that regard, the most relevant feature of Žižek's thought is how what in standard treatments of Lacan seems to remain a singular, almost purely formal structuring principle definitionally resisting symbolization—think of those Lacanians who chide our naiveté in

²³ The contemporary American left rightly notes the hypocrisy-verging-on-absurdity of the right's assigning, for example, the utterly equivocal “freedom” to its entire range of projects down to its side dish “freedom fries.” On this, note *The Onion*'s parodic denomination, in “Care for 9/11 Illness,” of air-quality-induced illnesses in post-9/11 New York as “Freedom Lung.” But the left might benefit from releasing its cultivated distaste of political rhetoric to understand the cognitive power of such formulations. Neuropsychologist Drew Westen writes with savvy on this point, for example in a very popular *New York Times* op-ed, “What Happened to Obama?” Writing of Barack Obama's inauguration speech, Westen writes that in the midst of a recession “Americans needed their president to tell them a story that made sense of what they had just been through, what caused it, and how it was going to end,” and he encapsulates Obama's failures in the fact that “there was no story—and there has been none since.” While acknowledging that “[a] story isn't a policy,” Westen, like so many of the other social theorists examined in this chapter, upends the assumption that politics is primarily about the better policy. Westen's further observation that Obama's “stories virtually always lack one element: the villain who caused the problem, [...] as if the cause of others' misery has no agency and hence no culpability” looks forward to the discussion of Carl Schmitt's critique of liberal proceduralism and rationalism—the liberal insensibility to the innateness of antagonism—in the conclusion of this dissertation.

²⁴ This is akin to the “citational politics” Judith Butler models in *Bodies That Matter* (21).

reducing the master signifier of the Phallus to an anatomical appendage—in Žižek's employ is instrumentalized as a model for the multifarious worldly effects of two central psycho-social antagonisms,²⁵ that is, one antagonism more than usually credited to psychoanalysis's regard.

Stripping the phallus of its unitary-transcendental status and situation as the explanatory source of all cultural phenomena, Žižek advertises the Lacanian conception of a fundamental structuring antagonism as an apt analytic for (at least) one more (second) real social phenomena, namely the "class struggle."²⁶ In this, he provides a compelling and useful synthesis of Marxist

²⁵ On this movement beyond a transcendental "one," Barbara Johnson argues in *Mother Tongues* that "the plurality of languages and the plurality of sexes are alike in that they both make the 'one' impossible. Two and two thousand are less different than one and two" (25). That is, I take it, the centrifugal break of the binary "two" from the powerful, centripeto-conceptual pull of the universalizing "one" represents a more significant break than that represented by further pluralization, since the binary "two"'s proliferative itinerary already anticipates the multitudinous 2000. Johnson's analogy is questionable though, since even if the originary difference of the "second" opens the flood-gates to the possibility, even likelihood or necessity, of further differentiation between or beyond the original poles, such a movement seems not as fluid in, say, the realm of sexes as it is in languages: an informed relativism about linguistic diversity is common enough, but think of the near-total cultural block to recognizing, minimally, an intersexed third gender, much less an infinite set of actual biological possibilities non-inclusive of the ideals of man and woman. Even more so, the hyperbole of 2000 suggests that the theoretical mind moves in fact too quickly from two toward the uncountable, very often the "infinite," foreclosing the provisional analytic efficacy of "human schemes," countable taxonomies, such as, to give some well-known examples, the attempt to understand realist fiction's operation with five codes, all of creation with 40 genera, the psyche with three faculties, or the human affective system with eight innate affects as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank dare us to in "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold." On the not inconsiderable difference between two and eight, Sedgwick and Frank "fear that with the installation of an automatic antibiologism as the unshifting central tenet of 'theory' we will lose conceptual access to an entire thought realm, the analogic realm of *finitely many* ($n > 2$) *values*. Access to this realm is important for, among other things, enabling a political vision of difference that might resist both binary homogenization and infinitizing trivialization" (512). Again, even if the total validity of any conceptual structure can always be demystified, revisable "analogic" structures remain our best access to sense. In "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," Borges writes, "The impossibility of penetrating the divine scheme of the universe cannot stop us from planning human schemes, even though we are conscious that they are provisional."

²⁶ There is no magic necessity or sufficiency to "two." He does not, thus, close the door to a third (or more), and indeed codifies the necessity of future supplementation (to correct our inevitable current ideological blindness) in his analysis of "the 'antinomy of critico-ideological reason': ideology is not all, it is possible to assume a place that enables us to maintain a distance from it, *but this place from which one can denounce ideology must remain empty, it cannot be occupied by any positively determined reality*—the moment we yield to this temptation, we are back in ideology" ("Specter" 17). In denouncing the ideological covering-over of certain manifestations of psycho-sexual and social-political antagonisms, the possibility remains that other antagonisms or other manifestations and other antagonisms will remain unanalyzed.

and Freudian analyses. First, in a Freudian manner, Žižek repeatedly marks sexual difference as a fundamental antagonism, for example in his praise “that the basic proposition of *Hegemony*—‘Society doesn’t exist’—evokes the Lacanian proposition ‘la Femme n’existe pas’ (‘Woman doesn’t exist’)” (“Beyond” 249). In one striking example, Žižek challenges the common devaluation of the supposedly impoverished surrogacies of virtual sex to demonstrate that “Lacan’s thesis that ‘there is no sexual relationship’ means precisely that the structure of the ‘real’ sexual act (of the act with a flesh-and-blood partner) is already inherently phantasmic—the ‘real’ body of the other serves only as a support for our phantasmic projections. In other words, ‘virtual sex’ in which a glove simulates the stimuli of what we see on the screen, and so on, is not a monstrous distortion of real sex, it simply renders manifest its underlying phantasmic structure” (“Specter” 2). A critique of the fundamental nature of ideology emerges from a consideration of what might otherwise be dismissed as material suitable to a self-help book or a psychiatric diagnostic manual.

And second, in a Marxist manner, Žižek accords the same fundamental status to the class struggle stating “class struggle is ‘real’ in the strict Lacanian sense [...] ‘class struggle’ designates the point with regard to which ‘there is no metalanguage’: in so far as every position within social totality is ultimately overdetermined by class struggle, no neutral place is excluded from the dynamics of class struggle” (“Specter” 22). It is important to note that “class struggle” is a catachresis given the various phenomena Žižek would gloss with it—late capitalism, organicist populisms, civil war, neoimperial interventions, among others. It might be clearer to understand “class struggle” in Žižek’s usage as a conceptually and rhetorically efficacious, historically-ingrained allegory of intra-social-group antagonism (recurrent and seemingly ineradicable hatreds based on race, ethnicity, religion, geography, language, etc.) as a whole, a

hegemonizing sign of that which makes the ideal form of the social bond as impossible to achieve as that of the sexual one.²⁷ Conversely to his analysis of sexual antagonism, an analysis of the most traditionally-weighty matters of political concern is thus rigorously homologized to the antagonisms of the personal-sexual sphere.

The relation of sexual and social antagonisms, if analogical, is not conceived as causal in either direction by Žižek. Taking their demonstrable innateness for granted proves much more fruitful. In fact, he models a fairly simple and agnostic approach towards handling their duality in the almost flip way his illustrations alternate, almost in the same breath, between large-scale political analysis of, say, the rhetorics circulating around war and totalitarianism and more everyday thoughts on the war of the sexes. In the following quotation, as among so many other places in his work, there is an implicitly-articulated tie between sexual and social antagonism:

The “progressive” tradition also bears witness to numerous attempts to conceive (sexual, class) antagonism as the coexistence of two opposed positive entities: from a certain kind of “dogmatic” Marxism that posits “their” bourgeois science and “our” proletarian science side by side, to a certain kind of feminism that posits masculine discourse and feminine discourse or “writing” side by side. Far from being “too extreme”, these attempts are, on the contrary, not extreme enough: they presuppose as their position of enunciation a third neutral medium within which the two poles coexist; that is to say, they back down on the consequences of the fact that there is no point of convergence, no neutral ground shared by the two antagonistic sexual or class positions. (“Specter” 23)

²⁷ Other than to point to one well-known exchange between Žižek and Butler, I sidestep entirely debates over how we can ever know the fundamental Real-ity of these antagonisms. In response to Žižek’s claim that “sexual difference” is Real, Butler asks in “Competing Universalities”: “Do we want to affirm that there is an ideal big Other, or an ideal small other, which is more fundamental than any of its social formulations? Or do we want to question whether any ideality that pertains to sexual difference is ever not constituted by actively reproduced gender norms that pass their ideality off as essential to a pre-social and ineffable sexual difference?” (144).

This flip flip between sex and class provides the organizing trope for my questioning in this dissertation, which is centered on similarly, if not flip, then genuinely surprising oscillations between the personal-sexual and political-social registers in writers of the European 1930s, whose work may provide (or at least occasion the search for) a more refined vocabulary and more concrete mechanisms for articulating this tie than is available in most political-philosophical discourse.

So, even though I do not disavow the possible success of the task, I am not offering here a precise transvaluation of notions of antagonism in Freud-Lacan and Marx-Engels, much less adjudicating the precision of these writers' causal and developmental schemas (tasks best left in the expertise of theorists and clinicians of minds and nations). For the realm of modern literature, I take from these thinkers, via Žižek among others, in a provisional way, the pragmatically compelling correspondence between the realms of the sexual and the social, two primary (perhaps exclusive, perhaps not), distinct (perhaps partially, perhaps not) sites of antagonism and irresolution for human society (perhaps universally, perhaps not), whose necessarily fictional expression, displacement, negotiation, sublimation, or relation are as central to the symbolic meaning-making of modern literature as they are to the political projects of modernity, making the forms and rhetorics of both novels and nations equally amenable to aesthetic analysis. The individual readings of literary texts I offer, focusing on representations of sexuality and politics, will test and refine this provisional correspondence.

CHAPTER 2:

Modernity, Contingency, and Literary Aesthetics:

Baudelaire on 1848, de Man, Rancière, and others

Theoretical Cautions on Political Formalizations

Given how widely engaged the Marx-Freud synthesis (the psychologization of politics, the politicization of the psyche, often through linguistic and other aesthetic terms) is to contemporary academic theoretical work, there is some arbitrariness in the choice of thinkers presented in the previous chapter to illuminate the central concepts of such work on political aesthetics. While the work of Žižek, et al., provide as good a resource as any for exploring these concepts, it may be useful to pause before moving on to a consideration of literary aesthetics and briefly survey the chief cautions and reservations that other theorists of the present and recent past offer the radical democratic formulation of the formal interrelation of the psyche and the state. I state these cautions not to discredit what has come before, but to highlight the necessary failure of any political praxis to account for the full contingency of the social or the psychic, the necessary provisionality and incompleteness of any theoretical formalization of the relation of the self to society, no matter how confidently offered. After these cautions I turn in the remainder of this chapter to theories of literary formalization, suggesting how literature as a non-pragmatic, non-“realist” discourse provides in many ways a better site to investigate the innumerable contingencies of existence.

1) The first caution would temper the often-sanguine tone of Laclau and Mouffe, by noting the profound disparity between, on the one hand, the performative and substantive effects of even the most savvy political rhetoric and form, the most tactically sound hegemonic

formulations and formations, or the most transgressive re-citations and revisions and, on the other hand, the brute inertial realness of existing psychic and material structures of domination. As Žižek himself acknowledges, when speaking of post-Althusserian French Marxists: “The ‘political’ critique of Marxism (the claim that, when one reduces politics to a ‘formal’ expression of some underlying ‘objective’ socio-economic process, one loses the openness and contingency constitutive of the political field proper) should thus be supplemented by its obverse: the field of economy is IN ITS VERY FORM irreducible to politics—this level of the FORM of economy (of economy as the determining FORM of the social) is what French ‘political post-Marxists’ miss when they reduce economy to one of the positive social spheres” (“Lesson” 75-76).

The power-wary left’s depressive awareness of the difficulty of any democratic politics (no matter how well played) to formally account for, much less alter, the historically rooted and globally distributed psychic and material processes of capitalism sustains several challenges to the Laclau-Mouffe position. In a fairly representative moment, Wendy Brown skeptically comments in her *States of Injury* that:

what is difficult to discern in the work of those who have appropriated the name “radical democrats” in recent years is precisely where the radicalism lies. What constitutes the ostensible departure from liberal democracy and from the forms of domination liberalism both perpetrates and obscures? Such differentiation is especially faint in their formulation of liberty, which rather faithfully replicates that of the sovereign subject of liberalism whose need for rights is born out of subjection by the state, out of an economy not necessarily bound to human needs or capacities, and out of stratifications within civil society (renamed “social antagonisms” [...]), all of which may be attenuated but are at the same time codified by the rights advocated by the “radical democrats.” (11)

Brown's critique notes how much is left unchanged structurally by a politics that simply rearranges the materials of the given political order. From where a genuinely revolutionary action would emerge is, of course, a difficult and fraught question, but one which the utopian left insists on foregrounding, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri do in a footnote to *Empire*: "Poor Gramsci, communist and militant before all else, tortured and killed by fascism and ultimately by the bosses who financed fascism—poor Gramsci was given the gift of being considered the founder of a strange notion of hegemony that leaves no place for a Marxian politics. (See, for example, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* [...]) We have to defend ourselves against such generous gifts!" (469). Brown and Hardt and Negri do not, however, directly confront the possibility that the "radical democratic" approach is not merely a pragmatic (capitulatory) accommodation to current capitalist political-economic realities but is instead a pragmatic (successful) accommodation to arguably more general social and psychic human tendencies that there is no reason to believe would evaporate in a non-capitalist political order.

2) The second caution would note that even if the language games of academic radical democrats may be much more nuanced than those Marx was playing, they are usually operating within a context several steps removed from the languages of actually dispossessed peoples. Thus, to the extent that a radical democratic practice could produce formulations of the self and society that effect material changes (despite caution #1), those forms may unintentionally reproduce patterns of domination. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, most well known for questioning theoretical access to the language of the subaltern, quite vehemently denounces the academic tendency of much Marxist theory on these grounds. For example, in her essay "Ghostwriting," she reproves the ideological analyses of the Frankfurt School and Althusser, due to whom "[t]he

implied subject of Marxist cultural critique is not the ‘worker’ (whoever s/he may be) but the academic or intellectual. Describing bad ideology is for him (or her) the perfect intervention, psychoanalysis a perfect instrument for correcting notions of false consciousness (paradox intended) until a Slavoj Žižek can rush in and pronounce what the Freudo-Marxian drift uneasily presupposes: ‘According to Lacan, it was none other than Karl Marx who invented the notion of symptom’” (77-78).¹ Spivak’s disdain here is incommensurate to any failings in Žižek’s or Adorno’s approach or intent, but it is a useful reminder of how little academic theory involves itself with actual politics, and how various, not merely complex, the aesthetic tools needed for progressive social change must be.

In *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, she again lashes Marx’s (other) disciples for betraying a radical politics’ primary commitment to ending actually existing oppression and inequality: “By the time nationalist Europe breaks the International in 1914, Marx is dead, the errancy is given over to Marxist intellectuals or communist state-builders, the emphasis shifts to ideology, until we get such absurd arguments as Marx the inventor of the symptom, [...] and the foreclosure of the ‘native informant’ is sealed” (76). Like with a genuinely revolutionary action, the search for a genuinely “native informant” is difficult and fraught. And again, while this is a useful caution, none of it directly falsifies the validity of ideology critique or the radical democratic project, and, indeed, much of it seems to contradict her own understanding of the undeniable relation between “social agency” and “philosophical speculation” in the former essay: “The two are related but not identical” (78). While Spivak reminds us that the “relation” which strives to be a theory suited to the contingencies of actually existing oppression can easily

¹ This denunciation comes up oddly in the section of this essay where she had claimed she would expand on Derrida’s third mistake in *Specters of Marx*, namely “the notion that without the religious the critique of ideology cannot survive or operate” (72).

turn into a rigid form that distorts our understanding of the others' experiences, she fails, unavoidably, to provide reliable criteria for ensuring that relation's exactness.

3) The third caution would note the danger of seeing all politics as state politics or communal politics. Thus, to the extent that a radical democratic practice can address political problems and affect the condition of the oppressed, it risks subordinating sexual antagonisms as epiphenomena, ignoring how powerfully such antagonisms condition those more recognizable antagonisms of macro-politics, and thus propounding forms of society inadequate to the complexities of the self. So, in a debate over the role of sexuality in Marxist theory, Judith Butler rejects the notion that the attack on economic inequality is the privileged front of radical struggle, with homophobia and related biases being—as her essay title ironically ventriloquizes—“Merely Cultural” and thus of a lower order of importance. Butler elaborates upon the importance of Engels's statements in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (and of precursor statements by Marx) to emphasize the genealogical intertwining of the sexual-domestic and the economic-political spheres and to challenge the putative incommensurability in much contemporary Marxist strategizing of their respective importance. She argues that “[t]he economic, tied to the reproductive, is necessarily linked to the reproduction of heterosexuality. It is not that non-heterosexual forms of sexuality are simply left out, but that their suppression is essential to the operation of that prior normativity. This is not simply a question of certain people suffering a lack of cultural recognition by others but, rather, a specific mode of sexual production and exchange that works to maintain the stability of gender, the heterosexuality of desire, and the naturalization of the family” (42). Since I will be exploring attempts to formalize this “tie” between sexual ideologies and political ideologies throughout this dissertation, I will move on from this caution without further comment.

4) The fourth caution notes that to the extent a radical politics engages the personal and challenges oppressive norms of subjectivation, it may fail to consider the profound disturbance that unbridled contingency poses to the psyche, i.e., it might fail to realize that formalization itself is not the problem. Jacqueline Rose has written definitively on the psychic and social requirement of stability. In “Julia Kristeva—Take Two” in her *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, she explores this “psychic necessity” in Kristeva’s questioning of “how to challenge the very form of available self-definition without losing the possibility of speech. Against the offered and familiar alternatives of bureaucracy and madness, it is women for Kristeva who know the necessity of, and demand, a place on the historical stage” (162, 158). Rose repudiates any romance of the psyche coming into its own free of norms or repressions and makes clear that the ego needs situating within a symbolic social structure to cohere and that the unconscious is not a wellspring of progressive political action. In “Feminism and the Psychic” in the same volume, she formulates Reich’s postulation of “[t]he unconscious as ideology (its present oppressiveness), or as pleasure (its future emancipation), but not something which hovers uncomfortably in between. This was the problem in the thirties as it re-presents itself to Marxism” (12). Her analyses unflinchingly explore this precise problem that the unconscious poses to sexual politics.

In a more recent work, *States of Fantasy*, Rose has shifted her attention to state-political ideologies and psychologies. On the perceived radical political potential of “postmodern” social and political dislocation, she notes analogously to her critique of anti-“bureaucratic” feminism that “[l]oss of confidence may be welcome, especially where it was misplaced, coercive, or oppressive [...]. But it is far from clear that the mind leaps from here into freedom. Hearts can retrench; the body which feels weak rearms itself. The carapace of selfhood and nations cannot

be willed—does not fall so easily—away” (2). The multiple regressions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century revolutions would support this claim. The caution Rose poses for a radical democratic politics is an understanding that the weakening of repression does not necessarily correlate with the instantiation of a progressive subject, much less an authentic selfhood. Such a caution can be addressed to, for example, Drucilla Cornell’s critical-humanist wager on reclaiming an “imaginary domain” through which each “sexuate being” can “share in life’s glories” (18). On the questionable axiom that life stripped of its social constraints is actually glorious depends her theory’s success. Nevertheless, Cornell implicitly emphasizes the unenticingness of a demand for a stringently antihumanist sexual practice, and concomitantly the dead-end of a stringently antihumanist social practice. Between her and Rose’s postulations, any radical democracy must somehow reconcile the theoretical evisceration of humanist ideologies and the impossibility of theoretical askesis in human matters. This very much becomes a privileged domain for literature.

Baudelaire on 1848: Contingency and Antagonism as a Literary Problem

Aesthetics as the study of reductions and formalizations, arrangements and exclusions, as I have alluded to in the previous chapter, traverses political theory and psychoanalysis as fully as it does literary theory. This is a recognition generally more intuited than acknowledged, and generally more acknowledged than explored. Several of the thinkers discussed in the previous chapter, however, take the interrelations seriously. For example, Drucilla Cornell asserts that “[t]here is a necessary aesthetic dimension to a feminist practice of freedom” (24), and Žižek asserts that “the shift from the political to the aesthetic is inherent in the political itself” (“Lesson” 76). This dissertation will not, however, focus on specifically political problems, or

claim that a close reading of Baudelaire can directly solve any. The turn to Baudelaire's aesthetic theory now is motivated, instead, by a desire to fully explore the role that literary aesthetics can play in understanding political and psychological dilemmas, both by exploring literary texts' thematic treatments of the ties between politics and psychology and, more importantly, by taking the meaning-making and meaning-dissipating strategies of literary texts in formalizing these ties as guides to other projects of meaning-making (the state, the psyche) that are less amenable to skepticism, less capable of sustaining self-referential irony. Again, taking modern literature provisionally as those textual productions that display conceptual cautions of the type that I outlined in the previous chapter (that display habits of thought that are corrosive on rigidified concepts), I turn now to survey the development of Baudelaire's aesthetic theory as an exemplary instance.²

A formative political context for Baudelaire is the Paris described by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. But whereas Marx reports on Parisian developments as part of a pan-European analysis, Baudelaire's focus throughout his life does not extend much farther than the borders of mid-nineteenth century Paris. The political history of Baudelaire's Paris practically parodies the notion of social progress with popular uprisings and liberalizing steps forward ruthlessly crushed by the apparently inevitable clockwork of powerful reactionary steps backward: the absolute monarchy of the Bourbon Louis XVI cast aside violently in the revolution of 1789 by a First Republic controlled by a democratic-dictatorial National Convention devolved later into an oligarchical Directory, which itself is ruthlessly cast aside by

² Dilip Gaonkar succinctly offers the conventional, though no less valid for that, view of Baudelaire's "modernity" by noting that "Charles Baudelaire, more than anyone else in the middle of the nineteenth century, self-consciously sought to make the character and contents of everyday life the privileged object of aesthetic contemplation and cultural critique. But everyday life, as Baudelaire recognized, is an elusive object: it is concrete, but fragmentary; it is immediately present, but in flux" (4).

the authoritarian First Empire of Napoleon I, upon whose collapse the circle closes with the return of the increasingly-absolute Bourbon monarchies of Louis XVIII and Charles X suddenly replaced in the July Revolution of 1830 by the constitutional monarchy of the Orléans Louis Phillipe itself suddenly replaced in the Revolution of 1848 by a, again full-circle, Second Republic quickly divested of its initial democratic reforms by the inept machinations of Bourbon and Orléans elites, catapulting Louis Napoleon to power as President-then-Emperor over the protest and bodies of a small group of urban socialists and a large group of bourgeois republicans, establishing in a third full-circle a Second Bonapartist Empire. The tone of contemporaneous critical thought was no less inclined to despair about the achievability of the conditions of possibility for a more just world, given the wretched fruits of democracy and the intransigence of communal-factional hostilities.

I have already cited Marx's manic despair in his anatomization of the events of 1848-1852, and his explicit tempering of the revolutionary process, the potentially indefinite extension for the advent of achieved proletarian consciousness. Baudelaire's thoughts on this period provide a compelling contrast with Marx's politico-philosophical rhetoric. For example, on the events of May 15, 1848, the day of an unsuccessful workers' insurrection, led by Louis-Auguste Blanqui among others, against the Constituent Assembly, Marx writes:

In vain the Paris proletariat, which immediately grasped the character of this National Assembly, attempted on May 15, a few days after it met, forcibly to negate its existence, to dissolve it, to disintegrate again into its constituent parts the organic form in which the proletariat was threatened by the reacting spirit of the nation. As is known, May 15 had no other result save that of removing Blanqui and his comrades, that is, the real leaders of

the proletarian party, from the public stage for the entire duration of the cycle we are considering.

The *bourgeois monarchy* of Louis Philippe can be followed only by a *bourgeois republic*, that is to say, whereas a limited section of the bourgeoisie ruled in the name of the king, the whole of the bourgeoisie will now rule on behalf of the people. (23)

For Marx here, as throughout *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, this failure is reintegrated into a scheme of rational causes and effects, where the bourgeois-ification of the revolution is narrativized as an inevitable consequence (“can be followed only by”) of its place and time. The rightness of the proletarians, much less the coherence of the group so designated, is not questioned, and the mobilization of those opposed is conceived as the consolidation of an “organic form,” a quasi-daemonic apparition.

In contrast, Baudelaire provides the following retrospective view of this same event of May 15, as part of the entire debacle of the Second Republic, in his commonplace book, *My Heart Laid Bare* (1859-1866):

XXX. My wild excitement in 1848. What was the nature of that excitement? The taste for revenge. Natural pleasure in destruction. Literary excitement; memories of my reading. The 15th of May. Still the pleasure in destruction. A legitimate pleasure, if what is natural be legitimate. The horrors of June. Madness of the People and madness of the Bourgeoisie. Natural delight in crime. My fury at the Coup d’Etat. How many gunshots have I endured! Another Bonaparte! What infamy! And, meanwhile, all is quiet. Has not the President some right to invoke? What Napoleon III is. What he is worth. To find the explanation of his nature and of his mission under Providence. XXXI. To be a useful person has always appeared to me something particularly horrible. 1848 was amusing

only because of those castles in the air which each man built for his Utopia. 1848 was charming only through an excess of the ridiculous. Robespierre can only be admired because he has made several beautiful phrases. XXXII. Revolution confirms Superstition, by offering sacrifice. (67-68)

These expressionistic entries lack the marks of sustained reflection on or analysis of the failures of the Second Republic, but still evidence an internal political drama featuring: a flood of past revolutionary passion (“My wild excitement in 1848.”) and shock (“The horrors of June”), anger (“My fury at the Coup d’Etat.”), and despair (“Another Bonaparte! What infamy!”) at its devastation. Much of this dynamic is seen equally well in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. However, what sets Baudelaire’s reminiscences apart from Marx is the foregrounding of the interplay of ideological and psychic fantasies (“Revolution confirms Superstition”) as crucial factors in the events and their later interpretations.³

So when Baudelaire talks about awkward attempts to comprehend the result (“To find the explanation of his nature and of his mission under Providence”), about a fatal reckoning for utopianism (“those castles in the air which each man built for his Utopia”), about a re-trenching of the heart and abjection of the now-bad passion (“an excess of the ridiculous”), and some form of vague resignation to an existential truth, he intuits the failure of a rationalist view of these events.⁴ It seems uncontroversial to state that Baudelaire was not a great political thinker, that he

³ Leo Bersani locates Baudelaire’s psychological-existential dilemma as occurring “at that critical moment in our culture’s history when an idealistic view of the self and of the universe is being simultaneously held onto and discredited by a psychology [...] of the fragmented and the discontinuous.” Bersani finds of Baudelaire’s poetry that it “gives us images of this psychic fragmentation at the same time that it documents a determined resistance to all such ontological floating” (4). This extended “critical moment,” characterized by conflict between the pull of modern contingent understandings and the inertia of traditional foundationalist ones, could define the historical-intellectual context for all of the readings that I give in this dissertation.

⁴ In a similar vein, Richard Klein also brings Marx’s and Baudelaire’s texts on the Second Republic together, along with other writings by Baudelaire, to highlight Baudelaire’s more complex relationship to

contributed little to understanding the spheres of civil society and government, especially as his theoretical and creative focus only early, briefly, and incompletely canvassed those arenas. Likewise it would not be fruitful to pursue his personal reflections for analytical insights. But from the seemingly reflexive disenchantment with democratization expressed in the passage above it does not then follow that Baudelaire was the naïve, precipitate prosodist-*conspirateur* of popular imagination. If anything, there is a strong, essential aesthetic-theoretical continuity—the problematic of formalizing and abiding the unnerving vagaries of contingent developments—between Baudelaire’s supposedly engagé writings up through the demise of the Second Republic (usually taken as a naïve young man’s reflexive socialist-tinged republicanism) and the supposed spiritualized aestheticist reaction that characterized his thought after the coup of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte (usually taken as a bitter older man’s disillusioned conservatism).

For example, in the final section, entitled “Of the Heroism of Modern Life,” of his pre-revolutionary review essay on the Paris Salon of 1846, the modernist aesthetic manifesto is indeed colored by a noticeably republican discourse. Baudelaire charges his contemporaries to look beyond “our victories and political heroism” and “open our eyes” and see that “Parisian life is rich in poetic and marvelous subjects,” that it exhibits “[t]he spectacle of fashionable life and of thousands of stray souls—criminals and kept women” (44-45).⁵ The beneficial deflation from the heretofore monumental art “commissioned and paid by the government” to an art capturing seemingly drab “private life,” a life performed in the “much maligned” and gloomy “outer garb

utopian revolutionary politics: “For Baudelaire revolution is a temptation and a danger precisely because it prompts this kind of confusion between imagination and reality; it encourages the poet to mistake the truth of his utopian vision, to imagine that because he can conceive a better life, that life is within reach” (93). Klein goes on to claim that, for Baudelaire, “[t]he Revolution was a farce because neither the revolutionaries nor their opponents even began to diagnose the source of man’s misery” (96).

⁵ Unless otherwise stated, all citations from Baudelaire’s criticism in the rest of this chapter are from *Baudelaire as a Literary Critic*.

of the modern hero,” mirrors the demagicization in the fall from monarchy’s self-sustaining splendor to the seemingly mechanistic vulgarity of republic: the aesthetic injunction to appreciate “nuances in color” in the seemingly monochromatic bourgeois dress of “the black suit and the frock coat,” assumes a political call to understand “the political beauty” of a “uniform livery of mourning [which] bears witness to equality” in the modern state (43-44). However, this demand for an aesthetics that engages and comprehends the contingencies of contemporary cultural materials—here the inexorable social force of a too-easily caricatured bourgeoisie to whom the essay is ironically dedicated—this insistence that “there are such things as modern beauty and heroism” does not leave Baudelaire’s work after the revolution, even if reverence for the bourgeoisie does.

Even at the peak of his revolutionary enthusiasm, the years following the revolution of February 1848 but preceding the December 1851 coup d’état, it would be difficult to discern specific political endorsements or directives in the ethical-cognitive labor which Baudelaire assigns to art, beyond a generalized call for a searching engagement with the life lived in Paris and the experience felt by the full spectrum of Parisians. It is perhaps more than a quibble to note that such a posture stakes out fairly sizeable aesthetic-ideological claims, but what makes it exceptional is its self-exception from the bitterly-staked political ideologies around which parliamentary and extra-parliamentary French political life in the Second Republic was organized. In “The Respectable Drama and Novel” (1851), written during the Second Republic, Baudelaire emphatically rejects the didactic literature of *bon sens*, ironically musing whether this bourgeois palliative is actually “succeeding in making virtue admired and respected” (64-65). He notes that one writer of this stripe in dramatizing “perfect chastity” inadvertently speaks “the language of the market place, the language of the rich and fashionable, thinking he has spoken

that of virtue” (65). Just as the endorsement of the bourgeois as subject was not an endorsement of bourgeois ideology, neither is this critique of ideological bourgeois literature exactly a critique of bourgeois ideology.

What Baudelaire objects to in the literature of *bon sens* is the lack of nuance and the insensibility to the contingencies of actual modern life. This is, thus, less a rejection of bourgeois economics or morality in particular, which are undoubtedly faulted, than of ideological mystification and simplistic formalization in general, since Baudelaire goes on to spurn “the same eccentricities of language” when employed for quite other ideological ends by overblown romantics, “a group of poets stupefied by pagan pleasure who constantly use words such as *holy*, *ecstasy*, *prayer*, etc., in order to describe persons and things that have nothing holy or ecstatic about them” (66). He extends the critique even further to more ideologically-sympathetic writing, finding it “painful to note that we find similar errors in [...] the socialistic” school, who make, like the bourgeois, of art “nothing more than a question of propaganda” (68). Again, Baudelaire proffers a vision of an art that serves no ends other than precisely comprehending and formalizing an undistorted social reality. He asks, “Is art useful? Yes. Why? Because it is art. Is there a pernicious art? Yes. It is one that falsifies the conditions of life” (68). Baudelaire calls, here as he did before and as he will after the Second Republic, for an art borne of “a belief in an integral unity,” of an undistorted social vision, not for an art that substitutes the false unity of ideological consistency, even as he in his earlier writings cannot fully restrain his enthusiasm for the republican-socialist ideology.⁶

⁶ Around the same time, in “The Pagan School” (1852) Baudelaire also denounces neo-classicist formalism because of its obfuscatory relation to the actual forms and histories of contemporary culture: “To dismiss passion and reason is to kill literature. To repudiate the efforts of a preceding society, Christian and philosophic, is to commit suicide, to refuse the possibility and the means for improvement. [...] The world will appear to you only in its material form. The springs which make it move will remain hidden for a long time” (76). The hidden springs that lead to improvement are another sign of

Indeed, a desire for more than just representational justice animates Baudelaire's thought throughout, nowhere more so than in his 1851 preface to Pierre Dupont's poetic glorifications of rustics and laborers. Baudelaire touches upon familiar themes. Amoral and formalistic Romantic aestheticism is dismissed as a "puerile Utopia," both "inevitably sterile" and "flagrantly contrary to the spirit of humanity." A preference is made for "the poet who is in continuous communication with the men of his time" and working in an idiom that is correspondingly "sufficiently correct" (52). Capitalism is disparaged, not exactly in itself but for its tendency to occlude "enthusiasm, charity, philosophy and all that which makes for a common patrimony" (53). And concomitantly, in keeping with this impetus toward charity, Dupont's exemplary distinction is found to be "his love of virtue and humanity," "his boundless enthusiasm for the Republic," and his "joy!" (59). In this committed praise of Dupont, an ideologically republican discourse calcifies in the place where in clearer moments Baudelaire would maintain a constitutive lacuna. But if Baudelaire momentarily falsifies the integrity of his aesthetic creed here, he does so in consistent adherence to a critical imperative, stated in 1846, to "be biased, impassioned, partisan" (38). Indeed, the shock is not the claim that after Barbier's poetry on the 1830 revolution "art was thereafter inseparable from morality and utility"—a purposive art was always desired—but simply its unqualified assignment, under the sway of fleeting world-history, of morality to one partisan position and utility to one political theme (53). This precipitate over-commitment was short-lived.

The evisceration of the 1848 revolution and elevation of Napoleon III was undoubtedly disillusioning. I have already cited, from *My Heart Laid Bare*, Baudelaire's considerable

Baudelaire's passion for progress and justice, here seen as shirked by a formalist detachment that "leads to monstrous and unknown disorders" exemplified by "an infernal pleasure" in the sufferings of the poor (77).

disorientation by these events. But to cast his ensuing critical course as purely reactionary is to simplify Baudelaire's path. Yes, in his review of the 1855 Exposition Universelle, three years into the Second Empire, there is—as if in direct address to defeated socialist, republican, and monarchical idealists alike—a categorical rejection of teleology, of “the idea of progress[, t]his dim beacon [...] licensed without the sanction of Nature or God” (82). Given the disasters of the Second Republic, Baudelaire proclaims that “[h]e who wishes to see clearly into history must first of all extinguish this treacherous beacon” for under its thrall “liberty vanishes” (82). Yet progress has not vanished for Baudelaire, only a belief in any preordained narrative of its practical enactment:

If today a nation is more discerning in its understanding of moral issues than it was in the preceding century, there is progress; that is clear enough. If this year an artist produces a work showing more skill or imaginative power than he showed the year before, it is certain that he has made progress. If the products of today are better and cheaper than they were yesterday, that is evidence of indisputable progress in the material order. But where, may I ask, is the guarantee of progress in the future? For that is how the disciples of the philosophers of steam and sulphur matches understand it: progress appears to them only in the form of an indefinite series. Where is that guarantee? It exists, I say, only in your credulity and your self-complacency. (83)

If Baudelaire's political theorizing reaches a dead end, it is because it is paralyzed by an acute awareness of the finite prophetic range and power of any utopian “indefinite series,” given the contingencies of actual historical development. He does not, in response, take hypocritical comfort from the previously rejected intellectual anodynes of aestheticism, academicism,

commercialism, or spirituality. His choice is to continue engaging these vexing realizations in a more manageable realm, that of literary aesthetics.

Indeed, one could argue that the entire political problematic is absorbed into the aesthetic discourse. There is a retrenchment from treacherous state politics driven by the realization that even though “nations, vast collective beings, are subject to the same laws as individuals,” the collective’s direct enlightenment seems impossibly distant, and social and political forces are too multifarious and contradictory to conceptually harness (84). Baudelaire’s critical energy is instead directed into an autonomous art, one for individual readers, that is able to stage, engage, and learn to abide the irresolvable antagonisms of social life, to impart to all, not a perfect transcendent view of God or Utopia, much less of the future, but the rather more immanent “divine grace of cosmopolitanism” (79). The battle against ideological systemization is shifted to the theoretically core yet politically less contested field of aesthetics. Baudelaire proclaims that “[t]o escape the horror of these philosophical apostasies, I proudly resigned myself to modesty: I was content to feel; I sought refuge in an impeccable naïveté” (81). In the “naïve” analysis of art, Baudelaire can distill his insight into inadequate political formalizations that “a system is a kind of damnation which forces us to a perpetual recantation” and denounce a rigidly utopian political thinker as “[t]he mad doctrinaire of Beauty [...] confined within the blinding fortress of his system [who] would blaspheme life and nature” (80).⁷ These aesthetic-political recantations are seemingly coerced by the radical disturbance posed to any “smooth” political narrative or system by what is alternately termed: “a spontaneous, unexpected product of universal vitality”;

⁷ In the “Salon of 1846” Baudelaire had already diagnosed the powerful conceptual-psychological allure of simplistic taxonomic systems: “During the unhappy period of revolution which I mentioned a moment ago and whose many mistakes I have recorded, Eugène Delacroix was often compared to Victor Hugo. People had their romantic poet, they had to have a corresponding painter. This absolute insistence on finding counterparts and equivalents in the different arts often leads to strange blunders, and in this case offers further proof of a lack of comprehension” (41).

“multiform and multicolored beauty”; “[v]ariety, the *sine qua non* of life”; “something always new”; “[t]he element of surprise”; “an artless, unpremeditated, unconscious strangeness [...] determined by milieu, climate, custom, race, religion, and the artist’s temperament” (81-82). We could say: history, psychology, the unprogrammable, the contingent, revolution, reaction, coup.

The vexatiousness of political life remains a haunting theme in Baudelaire through 1859’s “The Painter of Modern Life.” Here, there is a single, sedate reference to “the pageantry of 1848” and a passing observation of “the Emperor of the French” (*Painter* 24, 23). However, it is difficult to imagine that anything other than the Second Republic’s miscarried democratic contestations animates the poet’s fervid account of the chaos of unorganized sense impressions that simultaneously enjoin and hinder the artist’s labor:

An artist [...] will find himself at the mercy of a riot of details all clamouring for justice with the fury of a mob in love with absolute equality. All justice is trampled under foot; all harmony sacrificed and destroyed; many a trifle assumes vast proportions; many a triviality usurps the attention. The more our artist turns an impartial eye on detail, the greater is the state of anarchy. Whether he be long-sighted or short-sighted, all hierarchy and all subordination vanishes. (16)

This makes vivid the epistemological link between aesthetic and political formalizations: a political theorist may find himself as likely as an aesthetic theorist to analyze a triviality’s imperial usurpation and an anarchic mob’s injustice. In art the political miscarriage of utopian programs will be understood “so that the orders of the brain may never be perverted by the hesitations of the hand and that finally execution, ideal execution, may become [...] unconscious and spontaneous” (17). Art will provide an arena for focused reflection on the best means for judiciously and permanently organizing chaotic social materials. And the prophet of this effort

will be the dandy: “Dandyism appears above all in periods of transition, when democracy is not yet all-powerful, and aristocracy is only just beginning to totter and fall. In the disorder of these times, certain men who are socially, politically and financially ill at ease, but are all rich in native energy, may conceive the idea of establishing a new kind of aristocracy [...]. Dandyism is the last spark of heroism amid decadence” (28).⁸ Despite the presentism of these statements, this is a conceptual heroism of those who are “ill at ease” in their ongoing battle against powerfully ingrained ideologies of reaction and revolution, and unwilling to subscribe to illusions of ideal lost pasts or ideal available futures.

Indeed, the social “disorder of these times” is akin to the ethical chaos Baudelaire senses timelessly in nature, human and non-human. Inner and outer nature reflect each other in nothing so much as their common licentiousness: “Nature teaches us nothing, or practically nothing. [...] No sooner do we take leave of the domain of needs and necessities to enter that of pleasures and luxury than we see that Nature can counsel nothing but crime. It is this infallible Mother Nature who has created patricide and cannibalism, and a thousand other abominations that both shame and modesty prevent us from naming. [...] Everything beautiful and noble is the result of reason and calculation. [...] Evil happens without effort, naturally, fatally; Good is always the product of some art” (32). As before, the artist then must exempt himself from all received ideologies,

⁸ In his essay “Spengler After The Decline,” Theodor Adorno argues somewhat similarly about the clearer vistas available to “decadents”: “Spengler’s hunter’s eye, which mercilessly scrutinizes the cities of mankind as though they were the wilderness they really are, overlooks one thing—the forces released by decay. *‘Wie scheint doch alles werdende so krank’* [‘How sick seems all becoming’]—Georg Trakl’s line transcends Spengler’s landscape. In a world of brutal and oppressed life, decadence becomes the refuge of a potentially better life by renouncing its allegiance to this one and to its culture, its crudeness, and its sublimity. The powerless, who at Spengler’s command are to be thrown aside and annihilated by history, are the negative embodiment within the negativity of this culture of everything which promises, however feebly, to break the dictatorship of culture and put an end to the horror of pre-history. In their protest lies the only hope that fate and power will not have the last word. What can oppose the decline of the west is not a resurrected culture but the utopia that is silently contained in the image of its decline” (72).

even seemingly beneficent naturalist-romantic ones, and naively re-immense himself in actual lived experience in order to produce better, more adequate forms: he is a “*man of the world*”; he manifests “*curiosity*”; he is a proto-Nietzschean “convalescent” who is recovering “childhood” (7). For upon the discoveries made by this “inevitable, synthetic, childlike barbarousness” the dandy-artist’s imagination exerts “a power of analysis which enables it to order the mass of raw material which it has involuntarily accumulated” ranging over the city (15, 8). He offers new concepts for new times, new formalizations of new contingencies, and a recognition of the provisionality of these achievements.

Thus, the artist’s mission is Marxist-esque, for for him the confused “phantasmagoria has been distilled from nature. All the raw materials with which the memory has loaded itself are put in order, ranged and harmonized” (11). In the utopian culmination of the political allegory, the art object is forwarded as a site at which “[t]he values are all entirely harmonious, [...] they will continue to march in step towards the desired degree of completion” (17). Indeed, in this labor the artist is the model of the perfect philosopher-theorist. The painter of modern life is simultaneously “[o]bserver, philosopher, *flâneur*”; “he comes closer to the novelist or the moralist” than to the poet (4, 5). Not only a philosopher, he is also an ethicist: in his incarnation as dandy he engages in a proto-Foucauldian “system of gymnastics designed to fortify the will and discipline the soul” to abide the treacherous “rising tide of democracy, which invades and levels everything” (29). And yet, despite these political-philosophical inflections, these topical tropisms, this essay is grounded upon an aesthetic creed entirely consonant with the “Salon of 1846”: “Beauty is made up of an eternal, invariable element [...] and of a relative, circumstantial element, which will be [...] the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions” (3). All this is to say that throughout Baudelaire’s career, art is the conceptual, imaginative reformulation and

clarification, through the artist's labor and technique, "in a ferment of violent activity," of the contingencies of an ineluctable inconstant present, which pleases us "not only due to the beauty with which it can be invested, but also to its essential quality of being present" (11, 1). If it is not quite politics, it is an essential conceptual training for entering politics. Art is not answerable to society, but it is motivated by the ideological impasses of society.

The possible falsification of this essentially immanent practice by Baudelaire's outbursts of transcendental rhetoric is severely limited by the rapidity with which, in his theoretical writings, shouts to the heavens are succeeded by unmistakably mundane elaborations. So, for example, when in the review of the Paris Salon of 1859, Baudelaire rejects the pedestrian realism that urges, "'Copy nature; copy only nature. There is no greater delight, no finer triumph, than an excellent copy of nature,'" he seems at first to wholly endorse the retort, "'Nature is ugly, and I prefer the monsters of my imagination to the triteness of actuality'" (180). This "Baudelairean" imaginative idealism does not survive the paragraph, however, with the initial passion giving way to an analytical qualification of "nature"'s peremptory relegation to the world of non-human objects: "The artist, the true artist, the true poet, should paint only in accordance with what he sees and what he feels. he should be *really* true to his own nature" (181). It is the conceptual limitation of "nature" to a reified "objective" external world that Baudelaire rejects. As always, his injunction remains for an art, and a concomitant social understanding, that responds only to psychic and social experience in its "natural" non-teleological complexity.⁹

⁹ Fredric Jameson in "Baudelaire as Modernist and Postmodernist" recognizes as much when he claims for Baudelaire's poem "Autumn Song" an attitude toward humanity's irreconcilable situation—"living in the meaning-endowment of the historical project as well as in the meaninglessness of organic life"—that is neither "the sham resolution of metaphysics" nor "repression and forgetfulness," but rather the cognitive canniness of "a divided consciousness that strongly holds together what it separates, a moment of awareness in which difference relates" (250-251). In Jameson, however, this cogent statement of a universal existential predicament is overlaid with an unconvincing literary-historical schema: Baudelaire's rhetorical strategy of "symbolic reunification" in "Chant d'automne" is found to be

Similarly, when Baudelaire famously personifies imagination as the “queen of faculties,” his theatrical gesture is initially bolstered with some rather outsized claims for the accomplishments of her reign:

It is imagination that has taught man the moral meaning of color, of outline, of sound, and of perfume. In the beginning of the world it created analogy and metaphor. It decomposes all creation, and from the materials, accumulated and arranged according to rules whose origin is found only in the depths of the soul, it creates a new world, it produces the sensation of the new. Since it has created the world (this can really be said, I believe, even in a religious sense), it is only right that it should govern it. [...]

Imagination is the queen of truth, and the possible is one of the provinces of truth. It has a definite relationship with the infinite. (181-182)

And yet within this supposedly sure admission of Baudelaire’s retreat into spiritualism, there are already signs that Imagination is performing her work very much down at earth. We find her not dispensing received dogma from above, but laboring mightily to decompose (“It is analysis”) and reassemble (“it is synthesis”) the empirical and given materials of this world (“a storehouse of images and signs [...] which the imagination must digest and transform”) utilizing irredeemably human symbolic conventions (“systems of rhetoric and prosody are [...] required by the very nature of the spiritual being”) to generate, not discover, significance in a disinterested nature (“Nature is only a dictionary”) (181, 186, 185). So even if Baudelaire claims to employ the concept “in a religious sense” and accords a “divine origin” to it, Imagination becomes not

necessitated by the lack of “any confidence in some shared common *recognition* of the mysterious sense datum, the hollow sound, which is the ‘referent’ of the poetic text [“the hollow reverberation of logs striking the courtyard paving”]” (emphasis his, 255). Even if one subscribes to this Marxist nostalgia for the simple life, it is hard to imagine a circumstance when such communal confidence *and* the impetus toward lyrical poesis would have coexisted. That is, it is hard to know what pre-“modern” literature (one emerging from a community of perfectly shared experiences) would look like.

another face of God, but rather, in her decidedly un-theological embrace of “the critical spirit,” a sister to what we today embrace as “theory” (184). In Baudelaire’s spiritual turn, the mystic’s vocabulary of divinity fails to correspond to the commitment to contingent human endeavor. In another idiom we could say, the theoretical praxis and the metatheory do not converge.

This is no less the case in “On the Essence of Laughter” (1855), the high-water mark of Baudelaire’s critical metaphysics, in which “human laughter is intimately linked with the accident of an ancient Fall” since “in the earthly paradise, [...] joy did not find its dwelling in laughter” (*Painter* 149-150). But even here Baudelaire figures these supposedly transcendent gestures as a decidedly lateral movement over the bounds of “a theological ocean.” And when he comes to speak of Paradise, he finds himself not in some humanly inaccessible supernatural realm, but instead near the limits of decidedly terrestrial exploration in the South Seas, where he recites the cultural fable of “Paul et Virginie.”¹⁰ Again, “original sin,”¹¹ along with its extended Satanic apparatus, in Baudelaire works more to mark the structural limits of Baudelaire’s psychic and social understanding.¹² In this view, metaphysics is not an ultimate aim of creative and critical endeavor, but rather a proxy discourse for situating the surprising effects of its not yet charted regions.

¹⁰ All of this goes against T.S. Eliot’s pronouncement that “Baudelaire is essentially Christian” (383).

¹¹ Exploring Baudelaire’s improbable, grateful appropriation of this concept from the reactionary de Maistre is within the scope of this dissertation, but beyond the current ambitions of this chapter. The starting point for such an exploration would be Baudelaire’s declaration that “De Maistre and Edgar Poe taught me to reason” (*My Heart Laid Bare* 107).

¹² Relatedly, in “Baudelaire’s Satanic Verses,” Jonathan Culler argues that the Devil’s presence in *Les Fleurs du mal* should be read primarily as a marker of the caprices of the unconscious and the contingent: “Baudelaire’s poems [...] pose questions about the constituents and boundaries of persons, about the forces that act in the world [...]. This is finally, a question about the sort of rhetoric best suited to explore out condition; Baudelaire’s practice shows a commitment to hyperbolic scenarios involving diverse and unusual actors” (99).

Literary-Theoretical Elaborations on Contingency and Form: Rancière, de Man, Derrida

There is a long and varied history of attempts, in the wake of thinkers such as Baudelaire, to relate theoretical insights into literary aesthetics to the formal and conceptual structures of the social and political world. Here, I want to touch on two recent thinkers who have been particularly incisive in this regard, Jacques Rancière and Paul de Man, and then briefly consider the related thoughts of a third, Jacques Derrida.

Both Rancière and de Man recognize the complex ways in which seemingly private or subjective aesthetic forms both reflect and yet also condition social and political forms, arguing that seemingly innocuous aesthetic standards and evaluations may mask ideologies whose real-world consequences are far from harmless. Given this pressure on the structural properties of literature, both critics then also challenge the empiricist attempts of conventional literary history to organize literature in a coherent and easily delimitable sequence of formal, generic, or thematic innovations or tendencies. In their perspectives, close consideration of literary texts uncovers significant conceptual problematics unresponsive to such period categories, and an engagement with which requires a longer view of our historical situation, our “modernity.” While their work in this area extends over several books and articles and is motivated by a wide range of critical engagements that gives their theories weight, I want to focus on some of their most concise position statements, endpoints of that analytical work, in particular places where Rancière offers cogent thoughts on the aesthetical character of politics and de Man on the political character of literary aesthetics.

Rancière suggests that art and society are both instances of value-laden structural arrangements or, to use a word from his own terminology, distributions. In *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, he argues that “aesthetics can be understood [...] as

the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience” (13). As this definition’s reference to delimitations within the whole word of human “sense experience” makes clear, aesthetics’ domain is not limited to the world of art. Instead, conceptually ingrained “*a priori* forms determin[e]” our supposedly immediate sense experiences of the world. Rancière elaborates on the particularly “literary” aspects of wider human experience, avowing that “[t]he aesthetic sovereignty of literature does not therefore amount to the reign of fiction. On the contrary, it is a regime in which the logic of description and narrative arrangements in fiction becomes fundamentally indistinct from the arrangement used in the description and interpretation of the phenomena of the social and historical world” (37). In this formulation, the structure of explicitly fictive literary narrative becomes a model for understanding the structure of naturalized fictive social ideologies. Concomitantly, narratology becomes a tool of social analysis, given the human tendency to narrativize; or more compactly: “The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought” (38). Just as a novel, however complex, could never hope to do justice to the entire complexity of an individual’s experiences and social relations, so the human conceptual apparatus equally must simplify these experiences and relations into manageable (less or more complex, less or more “just”) structures.

This aestheticization of politics, a phrase that incorrectly implies to some ears the depoliticization of politics, may seem incongruous given Rancière’s emergence from a Marxist tradition and especially given his early focus on working class consciousness, in works such as *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. However, an aesthetic reading of politics—an analysis of what he calls above such “logics of narrative

arrangements”—draws attention to naturalized patterns of exclusion and domination, as well as to the cognitive habits that help such power plays succeed. Rancière draws the links between aesthetics, politics, and epistemology tightly: “Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct ‘fictions’, that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done” (39).

Epistemology (“Forms of knowledge”) is one overarching category for the analysis of underlying structural similarities here, as both politics and literature emerge from and respond to human consciousness.¹³

In a more recent interview with Peter Hallward, Rancière spells out how this understanding of literature sidesteps “questions of representation,” since the representational level does not provide the deep affinity with social structures: “Knowing how writers represent women, workers, and foreigners has never really interested me. My interest has always been in writing as a way of cutting up the universal singular” (204). That is, the analysis of the thematic treatment of social-political material provides little purchase on more ingrained and general cognitive habits. Because the cutting up, the arrangement or distribution, of elements out of a complex whole by various cognitive (epistemological) frameworks is not a necessary function of a decade or a genre or a locale, conventional literary historical periods (or thematic or superficially ideological groupings of authors or texts) become a hindrance to considering the

¹³ Steven Loyal, from the perspective of the social sciences, notes the importance of analyzing human social structures in terms of human “mental life-forms”: “The productive activity of human beings is a fundamental condition of all social life. An examination of the way in which people produce their means of subsistence is a crucial component of sociological analysis. The production of material life includes the production of material objects as well as the production of social relations, the latter encompassing family forms and gendered social relations. These two determinations are analytically separated here for theoretical purposes, but can and should be analysed and taken in conjunction with one another. Their relationship is neither fixed nor wholly independent, but changes historically. It falls to empirical research to uncover their historical variation and mediation in terms of psychogenesis and socio-genesis. Analysis of the production of material and mental life-forms in addition to the production of social relations and psychological drives constitutes only the starting point for sociological analysis (Elias 1994)” (185).

functions of the aesthetic in the modern social, economic, and political world, taking modernity as a process of centuries, not decades.

Given my focus on the early twentieth century in this dissertation, what is particularly useful is Rancière's singling out of "modernism" for special critique. He writes that "I do not like modernism as a concept, because it seeks to identify an entire regime of art with a few particular manifestations that it presents as exemplary, interprets in an extraordinarily restrictive way, and links to an absolutely uncritical idea of historical time" (207). I will return to this problematic aspect of literary "modernism," its restrictive account of a narrow canon, in my conclusion, where I will attempt to claim Virginia Woolf as more than a "modernist" by resituating her within an intellectual tradition that more meaningfully corresponds to the development of social and political modernity. For now, I note that the critique of "an absolutely uncritical idea of historical time," especially as such an idea is linked with an attendant problematic aesthetics and epistemology, might provide the strongest link between Rancière and de Man.

As with Rancière's, de Man's historical perspective sees more continuities between recent literary periods than differences. De Man does not idealize literary history as a progressive development of forms and themes: in "Literary History and Literary Modernity" he says an adequate literary history would require "abandoning the pre-assumed concept of history as a generative process [...], of history as a temporal hierarchy that resembles a parental structure in which the past is like an ancestor begetting, in a moment of unmediated presence, a future capable of repeating in its turn the same generative process" (164). Nor does he bemoan literary history as a decline from past cultural wholeness or greatness: in "Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*" he says that the idea "of paradise consciously regained

after the fall into consciousness, the idea, in other words, of a teleological and apocalyptic history of consciousness is, of course, one of the most seductive, powerful, and deluded topoi of the idealist and romantic period” (267). For de Man, the innumerable complexities of any particular historical situation are, first, only available in textual representatives of that situation, noting that “the bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions” (“Literary” 165). And, second, those textual representatives must be read without regard to existing generic, formal, or period categories in order to grasp their actual epistemological and ideological content: in “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric” he argues that “[a]ny text, as text, compels reading as its understanding” (261).

Reading, taken as a conscientious analytical practice, would put pressure on the necessary disjunctions between the semantic claims that a text may offer and the rhetorical structures used to forward those claims. Given his entirely disenchanted view of language, de Man stresses both language’s inability to guarantee the multitude of idealist claims encoded in it and the human inclination, nonetheless, to believe otherwise and thus to attempt to re-enchant language and via it, the world outside. At a very basic level, de Man’s critical project consists of an attempt to demarcate the difference between what can be said and what is the case. On this point, he states, “Truth is a trope; a trope generates a norm or value; this value (or ideology) is no longer true. It is true that tropes are the producers of ideologies that are no longer true” (242). Ideologies, including those relevant to the world outside literature, are expressible only as spoken or written texts (tropological structures) and other aesthetic structures, so our aesthetic assumptions and habits become a source of more than literary concern, especially as “deluded topoi” continue to exert powerful truth effects.

Like Rancière, de Man ties aesthetics and epistemology together tightly. Echoing Friedrich Nietzsche's claim that what passes as truth at any given moment has no free-standing objective existence, but is a rhetorical stratagem, de Man asserts that a given rhetoric's "effectiveness is not a matter of judgment but of power" (242). This power comes from the (and here lurks an implicit psychology) human cognitive tendency toward conceptual simplifications, including an idealized view of language's correspondence with reality and a formalization of the wild contingencies of actual existence. For de Man, thus, the aesthetic is a "principle of articulation between various known faculties, activities, and modes of cognition" ("Aesthetic" 265). And the drive of the aesthetic faculty is towards formalization, in all its aspects, a formalization understood as a violence to more precise understandings of these contingencies of existence: "the increased formalization of consciousness, as in a machine, far from destroying aesthetic effect, enhances it; consciousness's loss is aesthetic's gain." (269). In contrast, de Man insists on non-idealist understandings, or perhaps humble submission to the inevitability of non-understanding, efforts that resist the necessary reductions and simplifications that any tropological or formal structure must enforce.

De Man uncovers the power plays of the aesthetic ideology, not surprisingly, in the world of art, for example in his attack upon the conceptual simplifications of conventional literary history that subordinate texts' specificity to the demand for categorization: "Generic terms such as 'lyric' (or its various sub-species, 'ode,' 'idyll,' or 'elegy') as well as pseudo-historical period terms such as 'romanticism' or 'classicism' are always terms of resistance and nostalgia, at the furthest remove from the materiality of actual history" ("Anthropomorphism" 262). But, like Rancière, his analysis also extends to the world of politics. In his attack on anthropomorphism as the irreversible ideologization of a neutral trope, we can hear the very muted, but far-reaching

critique of humanist ideologies and their attendant political structures.¹⁴ Indeed, de Man claims that such “historical and political systems” are “correlate” with the “textual models” with which a literary critic would be concerned (“Aesthetic” 289). What seems like merely conceptual violence in the literary realm may underwrite physical violence in the other. De Man is concerned with the degree to which the valorization of organic wholeness and humanist idealism in the latter conditions, models, or mirrors violently constrictive organicism and humanism in the former. The stronger implication is that possibly the greater something is an “aesthetic” success (i.e., shapely, ordered, balanced), the more likely it is to be a conceptual failure (i.e., unfitted to the chaos of the actual world).

In a later essay, “Kant and Schiller,” de Man offers the strongest case for the problematic relay performed by the aesthetic ideology “from individual works of art to a collective, massive notion of art, which would be, for example, one of national characteristics, and which would be like the culture of a nation” onwards to “an aesthetic state, which is the political order that would follow as a result of that education, and which would be the political institution resulting from such a conception” (150). His suggestion here seems to be that the corrective to the necessarily violent purgations and stultifications of such a state is a counteraesthetic grounded in a stringent antihumanism, one devoid of any illusions about the unity available to us in language or

¹⁴ They are not so muted, however, as to excuse the deafness of Geoffrey Galt Harpham: “Neither Said nor de Man emphasized the way that the ascetic rigor of philological discipline—the commitment to empiricism, erudition, narrowness, and method—translated into critical power in the form of speculative freedom and the authority to pronounce on issues of immense moment. [...] They undoubtedly recognized that the otherworldly authority of philology derived from the fact that it was strictly a preliminary procedure, unimplicated in cultural, political, or ideological agendas. Accordingly, both offered carefully delimited and partial versions of philological practice that stressed such unexceptionable virtues as attention, care, and rigor. De Man simply ignored the historical and speculative dimensions [...]” (40).

society.¹⁵ As he says, when considering conceptual alternatives to aesthetic idealization, “[t]he most [true ‘mourning’] can do is to allow for non-comprehension and enumerate non-anthropomorphic, non-elegiac, non-celebratory, non-lyrical, non-poetic, that is to say, prosaic, or, better, *historical* modes of language power” (“AT” 262). The horizon of this difficult aesthetic askesis will become the challenge for the writers I consider in this dissertation, writers whose modernity is marked by the extent to which they struggle to achieve non-anthropomorphic understandings.

Now, whereas de Man’s literary critical writings generate an occasionally salutary, but too often paralyzing mood of intense anxiety over the ethical implications of the non-referentiality of language and the instability of all epistemologies, Jonathan Culler in “‘The Most Interesting Thing in the World’” has outlined a similar set of insights into the nature of literature in Jacques Derrida’s writings, insights offered in a seemingly more hopeful mood concerning the relevance of literary formalizations for political ones. First, in Culler’s account, Derrida strongly ties literature with democracy and democracy with literature, viewing both as types of interdependent spaces for the free exercise of imagination:

Derrida’s thinking of literature and democracy goes beyond analogy, in the dependency of the nonfictional on the fictional [...]. In view of such connections, calling literature

¹⁵ There is an important secondary literature on de Man’s aesthetic theory, of which I offer only two selections here: Jonathan Loesberg in “Materialism and Aesthetics: Paul de Man’s *Aesthetic Ideology*” argues that the materialism that de Man calls for “entails seeing the form of nature as that which is devoid of all teleology or purpose. Although that does not entail seeing any actual or real nature, it precisely entails learning to see a dehumanized nature, a scene that neither contains nor responds to any human purposes” (101). What this de Manian materialism would mean for practical politics, how “anything beyond ideology critique, anything constructive, will emerge,” is a question for Martin Jay in “‘The Aesthetic Ideology’ as Ideology: Or What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics.” While acknowledging the indubitable harm of an aesthetically idealized form of social organization, Jay inquires into “the more benign implications of aestheticizing politics in certain of its guises” (81, 79). On this, Loesberg notes de Man’s unmet ambition to complete his *Aesthetic Ideology* with an essay on the practical counteraesthetics of Kierkegaard and Marx (104).

“the most interesting thing in the world” is obviously not a turning aside from the public sphere to an inner life of the private sphere but on the contrary a deconstruction of the opposition between the public and private, the political and the literary, and a rethinking of what is crucial for democracy. (15)

As with Rancière and de Man, there is a paradoxical upending of the distinction between truth and fiction. In a non-foundationalist (“modern”) context, the impossibility of achieving a settled or final truth reveals the reliance of all provisional and pragmatic epistemologies on lyric and narrative habits of mind most fruitfully and critically exercised in the literary realm. Fiction is not, thus, a delusive substitute for nonfiction, but rather nonfiction is potentially delusive as to its reliance on fictional categories.

Culler notes on the homologous practice of literary and political formalization:

“Literature, we might say, displays the borders and folds that maintain a scene, that open a space, that institute the possibilities then enacted in the nonliterary events of our lives. Fiction is the condition of possibility of nonfiction as well as fiction” (9). The strongest ethical implication of this perspective is a demand that we take our often pleasurable acquiescence to the imaginative possibilities released by the non-referentiality of literature as a guide for imagining political futures: “This structure of the secret without secret is nevertheless a condition both of literature and of democracy. [...] The exemplary secret of literature has to do with the fact that the poetic or fictional sentence detaches itself from the presumed source” (13). While “secret” is an idiosyncratic formulation for describing the structural basis of literary and political forms, it can be readily related to an awareness of the groundless contingencies that motivate the institution of form in the first place. As Neil Saccamano argues, in Derrida’s usage the notion of “the secret [...] responds to an unconditional demand to do justice to singularity. [...] The absolute secret in

this sense names a radical ‘nonbelonging’ that precedes and exceeds the distinction between private and public, individual and social” (416). A desire to abide the “secret without secret” and not to finally unlock it becomes another way to describe the challenge of engaging in a non-metaphysical, non-foundationalist, non-teleological “modern” aesthetic practice, whether in literature or politics.

There is, of course, more to say about Derrida’s thoughts on the literary, but for my purposes I would simply emphasize how Rancière, de Man, and Derrida converge upon a link between literary formalizations and political ones, all three using insights gleaned from literary critical practice as a lever to dislodge seemingly intractable assumptions about political form and political reality. While such a view has significant implications for political theory, I will go on to explore in the subsequent chapters its relevance for understandings of early twentieth-century literature, examining critical contestations over lyric form in part two and over narrative form in part three.

Approaching Walter Benjamin

In the chapters that follow, I will attempt to give further theoretical support and some detailed examples for this reconfigured link between literary aesthetics and politics, where politics will mean not just social antagonisms but also personal ones in which the thrall of contingency and the force of antagonism will be felt in equally profound ways. That is, in addition to this more familiar attempt, as in Rancière and de Man, to ascertain the vexed relationship between the ideologies of the literary and the political—or in Jacqueline Rose’s compact phrase “this link between the autocracy of language and the polity”—I will also investigate the link to the sexual (*States* 29). The particular focus on sexuality is not surprising,

since sexual ideologies and identities are perhaps the most fundamental site where individuals negotiate, claim, dissemble, or disavow their sense of sovereignty over themselves, and thus provide a powerful model for such operations within the literary and social world. This link motivates the investigation, central to this dissertation, of the relationship between the sexual and the “properly” political, an investigation that asks whether, in the representations of the “modern” writers examined here, one conditions, models, or mirrors the other.

The contingencies and antagonisms of sexuality are obviously central to Baudelaire’s aesthetic insights. Throughout his critical writings he maintains a ceaseless concern with art’s obligation to comprehend and represent the radical contingencies and persistent antagonisms of human experience, free from ideological assumptions, be they socialist, republican, monarchist, imperialist, or metaphysical.¹⁶ A significant incongruity, largely unexplored in this chapter but touched upon in the next two, of Baudelaire’s oeuvre is the manner in which this critical prose, and the socialist ethos that underlies it, sits side by side with verse written in an entirely other register of sexual obsession and urban phantasmagoria. Indeed, Baudelaire’s verse is exemplary in its trenchant account of the rigors and rewards of sexual relations and psychic fantasies, whereas his prose insinuates mostly defensive cautions about politics. Though Baudelaire does not offer sustained thought on or forms adequate to integrate this thematic divide, his literary output makes implicit the relevance of insights gleaned from sexual relations for understanding the antagonisms that cripple the political world. I return to these insights on literary form and

¹⁶ One reserves the right to demur at aspects of Baudelaire’s judgments, such as the gender trouble he regularly finds himself in. Even so, his ingenuous sexism is telling, as in the “Painter of Modern Life,” where a polemic on feminine ideals is punctuated by an interest in techniques of maquillage that’s not quite straight: “As for the artificial black with which the eye is outlined, and the rouge with which the upper part of the cheek is painted, although their use derives from the same principle, the need to surpass Nature, the result is calculated to satisfy an absolutely opposite need” (33-34). Jonathan Culler in “Feminism in Time” notes that, taken contextually, “Baudelaire’s lyrics, for all their misogyny, seem positively energizing, producing a radical otherness of feminine sexuality that is threatening to men in its indifference and its link with death” (193).

political form and consider this divide in a more concrete way in chapter four, exploring several lyrics briefly and one quite closely, in order to juxtapose Baudelaire's trenchant modernity with Walter Benjamin's retrograde one. That Benjamin has been one of the most influential readers of Baudelaire is a troubling state of affairs that I will explore.

PART TWO:

The Resistance to Contingency

CHAPTER 3:

Messianism and the Decrepitude of Modernity:

Contesting the Aesthetics of Phantasmagoria in Benjamin

Walter Benjamin and Dark Times

Hannah Arendt's inclusion of her biographical essay on Walter Benjamin (written first as an introduction to *Illuminations* (1968), her edition of his first, posthumous translations into English) in her anthology, *Men in Dark Times* (1968), provides—along with an unarguably fitting coloration of his final years in exile—a useful category for adumbrating one level of conceptual consistency in a work whose gnomic mode, marked theologo-tropism, and reverential reception revolt such mundane analytical efforts. In everything that follows, I take it as axiomatic that the main privilege we can afford the writing of a critic as unorthodox and influential as Benjamin is to read it without reverence, without the common, understandable, yet distorting regard to the darkness of Benjamin's own end. The ambition here is to wager an assessment of Benjamin's criticism that departs from the near-hagiographic presentation installed early and effectively in the Anglophone world and instead find a critical mode equal to Arendt's characteristically dispassionate and precise summary of Benjamin's imperfect biographical and intellectual struggle with and against humanly-induced "dark times."

The phrase "dark times" has a provenance that Arendt locates in the work of another of Benjamin's acquaintances, Bertolt Brecht.¹ "Dark" is a fitting characterization, it will turn out

¹ Most notably in his *Svendborger Gedichte*, lyrics that meditate on Brecht's contemporary Europe's catastrophes from his Danish exile. "To the Later Born" ("An die Nachgeborenen") begins "Truly, I live in dark times!" and includes: "You, who will emerge out of the flood / In which we went under / Remember / When you speak of our weaknesses / Also the dark times / That you have escaped. // Since we went, more often than shoes changing countries / Through the war of the classes, despaired / When there was only injustice and no indignation" (my translation, *Gedichte* IV). Brecht later wrote poems

then, of not just the times in which Benjamin himself lived as an adult, whose darkness requires no further evidencing, but equally of the various historical eras on which his thought brought itself to bear. From one not-un-Benjaminian perspective, it may well seem that an awful darkness is the ground state from which human history only periodically and futilely rises. Benjamin's scholarship wanders furthest into the past in his 1928 *Habilitation* thesis, *The Origin of the German Mourning Play* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*), which focuses on theatrical works produced in response to the turmoil of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). This war is a quintessential reference point for German reflection on and despair of irrational, barbarous, and seemingly inescapable sectarian conflict, quite notably invoked in Brecht's turn in the darkest days of 1939 in his play *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939) to a literary figure from that era for a pointed exposition on the smallness of individual endeavor under the juggernaut of an unabatingly cruel and absurd social conflict.² Benjamin himself says in *Origin* that "at the time of the Thirty Years War, the [...] knowledge [of the impermanence of things] stared European humanity in the face" (223-224).

about Benjamin himself including "To Walter Benjamin, Who Killed Himself While Fleeing From Hitler" ("An Walter Benjamin, der sich auf der Flucht vor Hitler entleibte") and "On the Suicide of the Refugee W.B." ("Zum Freitod des Flüchtlings W. B.") (*Gedichte* VI, 49, 50).

² The only appropriate mood for such a world is announced in *Mother Courage's* Cook's "Song of the Great Souls of this Earth" ("Salomon-Song [Bettellied der grossen Geister]") in which a possible fortification against despair sought in the clarity of increased wisdom or temporal power is found to ensure only greater melancholy: "You saw the wise Solomon / You know, what of him became! / The man to whom everything was clear / He damned the hour of his birth / And saw that everything was vanity" (my translation, *Gedichte* V, 98). With some changes in the cast of *Geister*, Brecht found another home for this song and its despondency in the nineteenth-century London of *The Threepenny Opera* (*Die Dreigroschenoper*) (1928), mirroring Benjamin's conjunction of the nineteenth- and seventeenth-centuries. It is worth noting the possible reference to mourning-play dramatist Andreas Gryphius's well-known 1630s sonnet "It Is All Vanity" ("Es ist alles eitel"). Another prominent Weimar-era citation of the Thirty Years War is Karl Amadeus Hartmann's opera *Des Simplicius Simplicissimus Jugend*, an adaptation of the picaresque novel *Der abenteuerliche Simplicissimus Teutsch* (1668) by Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen.

Between the darkness of 1930s Europe and the Thirty Years War, Benjamin's scholarly work settled on the French Second Republic and Second Empire, whose political disasters I outlined in the first chapter. While the relatively minor scale of the repressions and political murders of the French 1840s are incommensurable with the Thirty Years War, which saw one-third of the population of Germany disappear, and with the later war that saw millions killed, the tone of contemporaneous critical thought was no less inclined to despair, given the wretched fruits of democracy and the intransigence of communal-factional hostilities, about achieving the conditions of possibility for a more just world.

Finally, Benjamin's letters to Theodor Adorno and others themselves repeatedly attest to the shadow that his times cast on his own mood, his writing, his movement, and his acquaintances. So, for example, he writes to Adorno on October 4, 1938—upon completing the first draft of the Baudelaire essay while in Denmark—that he does “not know how long it will still physically be possible to breathe this European air,” that “it is already spiritually impossible to do so.” Benjamin makes it clear that the writing of the essay was completed “under enormous stress [...] through the collision of historical events and editorial deadlines” and worry “over the last few weeks about my wife and above all about [his son] Stefan.” Indeed, a powerful, paradoxical eschatological concern underpins his entire intellectual labor to clarify the cultural struggles of the previous century, a struggle to give birth before the final darkness consumes the current century: “I felt I was racing against the war, and, despite choking anxiety, I nonetheless experienced a great sense of triumph when I finally wrapped up the ‘*flâneur*’, after almost fifteen years in gestation and just before the end of the world (the fragility of a manuscript!)” (Adorno and Benjamin, *Corresp.* 278). The darkness of the eras Benjamin intellectually inhabits blends

with the darkness of the times in which he lived, generating the preeminent unity in his scholarship.

It is eminently credible, then, to reconstruct Benjamin's critical project as an attempt to historicize, narrativize, and inhabit dark times, to conceptualize human endeavor given the melancholic pall any adequately clear-eyed view of millennia of enmity, violence, and conflict throws upon notions of history as actualizing or the future as guaranteeing programmatic social and political amelioration.³ The broadest theoretical question one could formulate around these concerns is a version of those I assayed in the first chapter: What in human nature and social organization leads to such unremitting antagonisms? One of Benjamin's last writings—the aphorisms comprising “On the Concept of History” (“Über den Begriff der Geschichte”)—provides his implicit answer. It is clear what the bleak march of history is not for Benjamin: it is not what he terms “historicism,” i.e., a belief in the progress of incremental technological and social gains proffered by a naïve socialism or positivism. It is also not, in simple opposition to these, a movement bereft of meaning. Benjamin's own vision of history, culture, and politics is idiosyncratically particular to him yet still well within the main currents of Judeo-Christian thought. It remains consistent throughout his work, even though he will eventually claim it is reconcilable with Marxist historical materialism and Marxist-Freudian cultural criticism.

There is a significant critique to be made of the irreducibly theological character of the broad arc of Benjamin's politics and historiography, but their world-historical scope and their ambition to account gnominically for the entire unfolding disaster of human history resist such evaluation and apprehension. Instead, noting how the grand socio-historical ambitions of his

³ Wendy Brown, in “Untimeliness and Punctuality: Critical Theory in Dark Times,” also cites Arendt and Brecht, commenting “[s]uch a chain of borrowings figures dark times as recurrent, thereby suggesting a certain genericism to the problem, just as the invocation of critical theory draws on a long historical vocation whose temporally local minions we would be” (*Edgework* 9). I will return to her assessment of Benjamin near the end of the next chapter.

magnum opus, the “Arcades” project, narrow to a literary analysis of the poet Baudelaire (not dissimilarly to how the grand political-historical ambitions of *The Origin of the German Mourning Play* find their ground in a narrow dramatic canon) and how the Baudelaire materials expand to dominate the archive of a nominally materialist critique of the birth, development, and dead-ends of commodity culture in nineteenth-century France, I will instead apprehend Benjamin’s thought through his literary and cultural critical methodology and primarily through his writings on Baudelaire. I will start by using the earlier analysis of the Baroque mourning plays to establish his critical vocabulary.⁴ While Baudelaire and Benjamin both offer a common diagnosis of collective social action’s capriciousness and liability to miscarry and their work is significantly animated by a not merely personal concern for worldly injustice, the aesthetic and psychological correlative of their politics are significantly different.

In what follows, I consider their competing understandings of the role of the work of literary art in an age of political repression to establish a more precise vocabulary for considering the social and cognitive functions and consolations of literature. I hope to demonstrate how unsuited Benjamin’s theological poetics are to Baudelaire’s insights on a disenchanted modern world. Baudelaire’s poetics of contingency provide valuable tools for exploring and abiding the disorientations of modernity. Their achievements are worth safeguarding and distinguishing from Benjamin’s strong reading of the poet. To say that literature should not be subordinated to criticism or philosophy is by now a truism—a useful truism, but a truism nonetheless. In the case of the Anglophone reception of Benjamin, however, Benjamin’s dismissal of Baudelaire holds an almost unchallenged sway as a profound reading of the poet’s work. I hope to clearly distinguish

⁴ To engage in a bit of un-critical-theoretical positivism, in the English translation of the *Arcades Project*, 160 of 794 pages, roughly 20%, are devoted to the Baudelaire convolute, though “Baudelaire” is only one of 36 topics represented. T.J. Clark appositely, if crudely, notes “the ever expanding and metastasizing study of Baudelaire” and also asks “why it got so large—why it took over” (“Should” 38).

the two supposedly congruent “modernist” thinkers as irreconcilable in their attitudes toward contingency and antagonism. I will proceed based on direct engagements with their actual words, as opposed to their reputations.

Benjamin’s History I: Seventeenth-Century Germany

The failure of *The Origin of the German Mourning Play* to secure Benjamin a career in the German university system is an oft-rehearsed episode in his legend.⁵ Regardless of the success or failure of *Origin* on its own terms and in its own time, an examination of arcane and idiosyncratic aspects of Benjamin’s later project on Baudelaire and the Paris arcades can be helpfully illuminated by examining resonantly arcane or idiosyncratic aspects of the historical reconstruction in this proto-*Arcades*. So, while the focus of analysis may go on to shift from the seventeenth-century German baroque dramas to the cultural and political life of mid-nineteenth-century Paris, and while the scope may have eventually widen from a literary genre to capitalist culture at large, a glance at the earlier work allows for clearer purchase on the constancy of Benjamin’s methodological and philosophical presuppositions and interpretative habits. In this section, I will demonstrate the three central analytical features of *Origin* that evidence Benjamin’s core theoretical tendencies: 1) a literary critical methodology in the service of demonstrating 2) a theory of politics which itself is a consequence of 3) an axiomatically

⁵ Indeed its failure only serves to cement its advanced critical position in the minds of many Benjaminians. A good example as any is Charles Rosen, who writes of *The Origin of the German Mourning Play* in his “The Ruins of Walter Benjamin”: “It was turned down by the members of the faculty at the University of Frankfurt, who declared they could not understand a word of it. No doubt. If they had understood it, they would have turned it down anyway. In his work, Benjamin mounted a sustained attack on almost all the forms of criticism and literary study that were practiced in the university—and that are still practiced today” (137). Such appraisals of course never broach the high unlikelihood the book, simply on grounds of consistency and form, could even satisfy modern expectations of doctoral scholarship, no matter how theoretically high-minded or Benjaminian its examiners.

asserted theory of history. These are given, basically, in the three main sections of that book and are formulated without any necessary reference to the content of the mourning plays.

As an opening move, however, Benjamin's tendencies need to be clearly distinguished from what has come to be taken as their most proximate and fitting purlieu, the traditional Frankfurt School political aesthetics of the "culture industry." In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Max Horkheimer impute to the historical unfolding of capitalism the atrophy of mass consciousness, locating capitalism itself within a larger dialectic driving the domination of internal and external nature. In Benjamin's work, on the other hand, there is only a belated and incomplete attempt to peg the perceived degradations of modern life and experience to the rigors uncovered by Marxist political economy. Indeed, while all three writers conceive of the pattern of history writ large as an unabating objectification of subjective and objective nature, for Horkheimer and Adorno this process begins in the secular time of historical anthropology as theorized by, among their key sources, Robert Lowie, Sigmund Freud, and Marcel Mauss. They explicitly juxtapose the Genesis story with Greek mythology as equivalent fictionalizations of primitive man's domination of a chaotic, fear-inducing material nature indifferent to human needs.⁶ For Benjamin, on the other hand, origin is not found in this animal existence but rather in a nonfictional Edenic-Adamic world preceding the intercession of linguistic and social-psychological mediation.⁷ This stark difference underpins fundamentally irreconcilable views of

⁶ However, for all the anti-metaphysical conceptual cautions and anti-positivist genealogical intensity, in Adorno and Horkheimer's narrative there still appears at the very beginning (and presumably end) of the dialectic of enlightenment an un-interrogated humanism in the figure of a man capable of non-alienated experience of himself and nature, a strangely misplaced historical nostalgia undoubtedly fueling, alongside contemporary historical pressures, the book's overwrought sense of loss and providing the strongest elective affinity between Adorno and Benjamin. That the unfolding of human experience from this lost condition—the ensuing dialectic of nature and history—is for Adorno ultimately an entirely secular process, provides the strongest point of contention between the two.

⁷ This uninterrupted belief in a now-lost unmediated condition is clearly enunciated in two essays written over the span of Benjamin's career. The early essay "On Language as Such and on the Language

cultural production and history's unfolding—and thus fundamentally different notions of the methodology most suited to cultural criticism—which will come to a head in Benjamin's epistolary exchange with Adorno on the "Arcades" project.

Benjamin devotes the opening section of *Origin* to an "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" in which he lays out detailed procedures for undertaking an analysis of German baroque plays. While I do not claim to give a completely reconciled and exact account of the intentionally non-intuitive, unsettlingly confident, yet often uncertain distinctions that Benjamin spins out, the following is one attempt at distilling an outline of his critical method. For Benjamin, what philosophical discourse can never achieve (or should wish to aspire to) is "systematic completeness" (33). So from the first page he positions his analysis as belonging to the fragmentary genre of the "treatise," whose necessarily "esoteric quality" spares it from the "spider's web" of "syncretism" and whose final persuasiveness is grounded not in a deductive rationality modeled on "the coercive proofs of mathematics" but in an unmediated access to truth effected primarily by use of "the authoritative quotation" (27, 28). The path to this "truth"—whose "unity" is "a direct and essential attribute"—is found in treatise-based "individual insights" that aim to align cumulatively the critic's "concepts" with what they seek, the pre-existing "ideas [...] simply given to be reflected upon" (30). These quasi-objective, quasi-mystical, free-floating Platonic "ideas" will eventually un-mediatedly emanate from, or manifest themselves given, proper "constellations" of those earthly cultural "objects" the critic studies

of Man" (1916) rejects, given that "[t]he proper name is the communion of man with the *creative* word of God," what "the bourgeois view of language maintains, that the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for things [...] agreed by some convention" (324). Even in a work from his Marxist phase, "The Storyteller" (1936), a correlation of literary genres with modes of production—specifically, the decline of storytelling with the rise of capitalist routinization—undergirds its materialist schematics with a historical idealism that imagines the oracular mobility of previous "great storytellers" on "[a] ladder extending downward to the interior of the earth and disappearing into the cloud[, which] is the image for a collective experience to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier" (102).

(34). They “are not among the given elements of the world of phenomena [... and] simply cannot be conceived of as the object of vision, even intellectual vision” (35).

For Benjamin, naturally, this divorce of “ideas” from “objects” is only so, however, because of our post-Adamic condition in which “paradise”—“a state in which there is as yet no need to struggle with the communicative significance of words”—no longer obtains (37). To establish the particular truth he will discover in his book, Benjamin proclaims that “the *Trauerspiel* is an idea” in just this way and thus cannot deliver its truth if considered historically in literary critics’ “aesthetic classifications” (38). Such taxonomic approaches, while occasionally valid, fail to provide “the representation of essences” required for philosophy (40). Instead the “origin” of the mourning plays is to be apprehended in the unique nexus of historical “becoming and disappearance” from which it “emerges” (45). Benjamin states that the genre’s super-tending “idea is a monad” which literally “contains the image of the world” which thus disgorges it (48). The purpose of his book then becomes to constellate quotes and other historical cultural objects from the baroque era to give a view to this supposed singular historical idea. Literary interpretation thus becomes a kind of mystical divination of higher truths.

Next we move to the theory of politics. In the first section of the second part of the book, entitled “*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy,” this Platonic division of realms, which necessitates a transcendental epistemology and the corresponding literary critical method that has just been discussed, also lends itself to a political analysis of the social problematic that the baroque literature, with its characteristic *mise en scène* of a besieged royal court and its historical context of internecine warfare between principalities, incessantly thematizes: the melancholy of the tyrant-king. Whereas Plato is surprisingly sanguine about the possibility of producing effective and wise temporal philosopher-rulers who will conscientiously shepherd society *towards* its ideal

form, Benjamin's temporality—envisioning the world fallen *from* a lost ideal un-recuperable this side of the Messiah—finds the ruler's failure necessary and insuperable. In the time of the Baroque, the ideal of a natural political representation that, undistorted through its mediations, could justify any regime's transcendental sovereignty is found unattainable. In the Baroque, the world is “confined to a context of strict immanence, without any access to the beyond” (80). The systemic failure of all post-Reformation regimes to sustain the illusion of their innateness in the social order, the failure to effect “the ideal of a complete stabilization,” and the “war, revolt, or other catastrophes” that follow unceasingly from this result are unsolvable problems.

Benjamin rejects Carl Schmitt's proposed totalitarian solution of an arbitrary declaration of a “state of emergency” as itself an admission of society's transience, as itself the *real* emergency, thus making the avoidance of this declaration “the most important function of the prince” in his quest to satiate “the demand for a principedom whose constitutional position guarantees the continuity of the community” (65).⁸ Again, while Schmitt also appears sanguine about the autocrat's ability to overcome a crisis in sovereignty through the arbitrary executive declaration of a state of emergency, Benjamin finds that “[i]n the *Trauerspiel* monarch and martyr do not shake off their immanence” in this world and, caught “like torn and flapping banners” in “the sheer arbitrariness of a constantly shifting emotional storm,” find themselves “incapable of making a decision” to proclaim and overcome this state of emergency in the state and “in the soul.” That is, they cannot satisfy their sovereign function, “replac[ing] the

⁸ Many critics have commented on Benjamin's scandalous indebtedness, given their shared avowal of a crisis of representative democracy in Weimar Germany, to the conservative, eventually Nazi, legal theorist Schmitt. The two most helpful accounts of this relationship quite identically note 1) Benjamin's acceptance of political sovereignty's constitutive liability to recurrent crises necessitating “states of exception” but 2) his unwillingness to follow Schmitt's secular view of sovereignty as based in inevitable and necessary arbitrary limits. These two are Samuel Weber's “Taking Exception to Decision” and Horst Bredekamp's “From Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, via Thomas Hobbes.” I will return to Schmitt, and the aesthetics of the decision, in a different context in the conclusion.

unpredictability of historical accident with the iron constitution of the laws of nature” (67, 71, 74). The tyrant’s necessary failure to inhabit and deploy “the sacrosanct power of his role”—for “[h]owever highly he is enthroned over subject and state, his status is confined to the world of creation” (85)—is not a merely individual one. Since it is a failure committed “in the name of mankind,” it casts “a judgment, in which the subject too is implicated” (72). Society is found to be irredeemably in history, fallen into “a nature deprived of grace.” Any hope of a stable, sustainable political order (of averting political catastrophe) becomes impossible, because there is no extant ground for such an order, a situation which reveals “the hopelessness of the earthly condition” (81). This is manifested narratively in the endless, “gloomy” Machiavellian intrigue that generates the crisis (97); dramatically in scenery of ruins reinforcing an understanding of history as a “process of [...] irresistible decay” (178); psychologically in the *acedia* of the ruler whose futile “introversion [...] led only too easily into the abyss” of melancholy (142); and rhetorically in the primacy of the arbitrary allegory.⁹ Politics, in this view, becomes less about the successes and failures of human schemes, and more about the unfolding of a divine judgment.

And finally we move to the theory of history. Underlying Benjamin’s idealist poetics and politics is a fundamentally Messianic view of history, one that emerges clearly in Benjamin’s discussion of allegory and symbol in his final section, entitled “Allegory and Trauerspiel.” As George Steiner’s introduction to *Origin* and even a cursory perusal of the book itself make clear, symbol/allegory is the primary binary that structures Benjamin’s thought (9). But it is hardly the

⁹ David Krasner’s “Walter Benjamin and the Lynching Play: Mourning and Allegory in Angelina Weld Grimké’s *Rachel*” is an interesting extension of Benjamin to an entirely other “dark time.” Krasner collocates American Lynching Plays and German Mourning Plays on thematic and formal grounds: “The experience of unprecedented violence is not merely commented on by the plays; violence itself is incorporated in the work through three dramaturgical devices: lamentation, ostentation (opulent language and excessive emotion), and allegory” (101).

only one. Other utilized pairings include: transcendence/immanence (78); myth/history (62); tragedy/*Trauerspiel*; inward/audience-oriented; silence/prolixity (108,118); Aristotelean/Socratic (118). Unlike contemporary critical-theoretical orthodoxies, which would unsettle the stability of such oppositions and challenge the simplicity of a conceptual scheme that would restrain the contingencies of the world under two alternatives, Benjamin flatly privileges the first category in every pairing as the lost and still desirable state, even as he somewhat dolefully acknowledges we live in a fallen world characterized by the latter. This is too often taken by readers wistful for a “modernist” Benjamin as anti-idealism or anti-foundationalism, when it is more correctly viewed as a deeply conservative nostalgia.

Indeed, both the epistemology and the politics that Benjamin brings to bear on baroque literature carry a much more general charge against human society, one far beyond the motivating horrors of the seventeenth century’s wars of religion. For, in his view it turns out that it is no particular “moral transgression but the very estate of man as creature which provides the reason for the catastrophe” revealed in the mourning plays, a revelation of “the natural aspect of the course of history” or, in an alternative view of the matter, of “the horror of a destructive will which periodically stirs in the manner of the forces of nature” (89, 88). This intended generality is revealed equally in Benjamin’s amalgamation of his historical theory from, among other influences, two particular traditions situated at polar historical extremes: the idealism of Plato (responding to the political catastrophe of the Peloponnesian War) and Schmitt’s pragmatism (responding to the political catastrophe of the still-intact Weimar Republic). So that the “feeling that [man] is being driven along to a cataract with [the world]” becomes a symptom of a longstanding fatalism that, even if particularly pronounced in the Lutheran world of the baroque dramatists, is nonetheless equally mirrored in, for example, “the grim belief in the subjection of

man to fate” felt in pagan times and equally in modern Expressionists’ search for a language “equal to the violence of world-events” (66, 138, 55). History at any given point is still a history of decline.

Nowhere is this trans-historical judgment more apparent than in Benjamin’s comments on the language available to historical man, the characteristic feature of which is its inability to achieve a “unity of the material and the transcendental object, which constitutes the paradox of the theological symbol” (159). Instead, the “form of expression” and signification available in this “profane world”—within “the satanic ensnarement of history”—is characterized by Benjamin as “allegory,” in which “[a]ny person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else” (162, 175, 141-142). What a modern semiotics would take as the essential nature of language, Benjamin experiences as an affliction. While expressed variously, the religious underpinnings of his distinction between symbol and allegory remain constant and are evidenced by: first, the subtending temporality, so that symbols reveal transcendental meaning in a “mystical instant” while allegory is yoked to a “corresponding dialectic” that defers significance over the span of earthly time, figured as “the Passion of the world” (165-166); second, in the postulation beyond an earthly existence that “has always been allegorical” of a higher nature, a transcendent realm gestured at by symbols in which “the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, [whereas] in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape” (166); and third, the linguistic idealism that imagines “a more vital, freer use of the revealed spoken language” in the “organic totality” of the symbol over the debased “written form” of the necessarily fragmentary “allegorical script” (175, 176).

Altogether, for Benjamin, the preponderance of allegory in worldly matters marks “an appreciation of the transience of things” and triggers “the concern to rescue them for eternity,” an understanding of human history as an impermanently fallen dispensation “where transitoriness and eternity confront[] each other most closely” (223-224). What Benjamin hopes to provide is a more accurate accounting of the demands of this eventual, eternal realm beyond allegorical thought. Allegorical thought is thus a failed eschatology: “it possesses no mechanism by which all earthly things are gathered in together and exalted before being consigned to their end”; that is, it knows no messiah (66).¹⁰ For Benjamin, the critic and reader’s task is not—in a revolutionary, existentialist, or gay science—to abide allegory as the given and inhuman condition of language, but rather to appreciate, realize, and nurture the mystical conditions for its possible and eventual supercession.¹¹

Before drawing links between *Origin* and the work on Paris, however, it is useful to acknowledge what I have passed over quickly here, namely that which lives in Benjamin’s thought. Even amid his abstruse scholarship on the German Baroque, even before the introduction of an explicitly political concern, one recognizes the prescience of certain unorthodox interpretative tendencies that a narrow critical presentism might consider innovations

¹⁰ In a 1932 talk entitled “The Idea of Natural History,” Adorno—focusing on the anti-teleological nature of Benjamin’s thought—assumes that Benjamin’s historiography in *Origin* is reconcilable with his own understanding of a dialectical materialist history, particularly in their shared opposition to dominant Heideggarian beliefs: “According to Benjamin, nature, as creation, carries the mark of transience. Nature itself is transitory. Thus it includes the element of history” (120). Adorno already notes an insufficiently materialist framework, however, asking that in Benjamin’s writings “the discussion must be pushed farther” to demonstrate that “all being or everything existing is to be grasped as the interweaving of historical and natural being” (120-121). Adorno’s later engagements will reveal how far apart he and Benjamin actually are.

¹¹ Susan Knaller, in “A Theory of Allegory beyond Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man,” comments astutely on this: “In his conception of an allegorical manner of contemplation, Benjamin has to fall back on the metaphysically conceived, ontological notion of order found in the things themselves—the true world is revealed in the constellation. The possibility of salvation, in the modern allegory, is shifted into the constellation (monadology); it can momentarily produce the unity of the particular and fragment with the absolute” (87).

proper only to recent cultural criticism. That is to say, Benjamin's charisma and endurance is in large part accounted for by his partial consonance with a modern critical practice that alike gives significant weight to historical context, traverses freely the demarcations of cultural canons and genealogies, borrows theoretical support idiosyncratically from across the humanities, interrogates cultural objects more for their fissures than seams, relinquishes the possibility of intellectually mastering its material, and is animated by a commitment to worldly justice. By posing the mourning plays, and later Parisian consumer culture and Baudelaire's writings, as a cultural problem, thus exiting the barren terrain of arbitrary aesthetic evaluation, Benjamin helps inaugurate a cultural criticism that appreciates the relation between economic, social, intellectual, and aesthetic production and analyzes culture for its historically entrenched and non-teleological role of mediating between the ideological contestations of social fantasy and material reality—a "cultural studies" *avant la lettre*.

Given how well he poses questions to culture, then, it is surprising how incompletely acknowledged, or even understood, many of his answers are. These troubling answers cast serious doubts on the intellectual affiliations cherished by Benjaminian critics, who often gloss over his decidedly un-modern theology—the reversion from naïve Enlightenment teleologies to even more naïve pre-Enlightenment teleologies—and his idealist linguistics. That is, for all his imagination in channeling social and cultural critique through literature, Benjamin's precipitous leaps to transcendental meanings (more or less given in advance) disclose a literary hermeneutics often grounded in little more than, as we will see in the case of Baudelaire, tendentious paraphrase of the literary text.¹²

¹² Not Adorno, Brecht, or Lukács, but William Empson, I would argue, makes the most telling literary critical counterpoint to Benjamin. Empson and Benjamin share: a historical situation in the 1930s (*Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 1930, and *Some Versions of Pastoral*, 1935); misapprehension by their contemporaries; a fraught relation to conventional academic professionalization (after being ejected from

Benjamin's History II: Nineteenth-Century Paris

Benjamin's next major project, analyzing the social and economic life of mid-nineteenth-century Paris arcades, features undeniably marked differences from his previous work, particularly in its shift away from the academically-oriented (even if methodologically unconventional) literary and philosophical criticism performed in *Origin* and in his first dissertation, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* (1919). What sets the Arcades-centered writing projects apart, constituting their internal thematic unity and marking a discernible era in Benjamin's thought, is, first, the eventual introduction of a handful of Marxist categories—versions of “commodification,” “dialectics,” and “phantasmagoria”—if not of typically Marxist analyses; second, a consonant change of focus onto more timely objects,

Cambridge for possession of a condom, Empson was forced to begin his career teaching in Japan and China); leftist political orientation (at a start, both had something to say about the proletariat in literature); and important statements on the seventeenth century (counterposing *Milton's God* and the mourning-play book could reveal importantly varied outlooks on faith and meaning). The most striking contrast would be Empson's resolute atheism and the attendant resolute attention to language as an imperfect human technology. Furthermore, much of Benjamin's logic is precisely characterized as “[a]n ambiguity of the fifth type [which] occurs when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing, or not holding it all in his mind at once, so that, for instance, there is a simile which applies to nothing exactly, but lies half-way between two things when the author is moving from one to the other” (155). Just some examples of Benjamin's penchant for under-cooked, portentous analogies: in the early “Arcades” drafts, “it is the same with the human material on the inside of the arcades as with the materials of their construction. Pimps are the iron uprights of this street, and its glass breakables are the whores” (879); in “The Storyteller,” “Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience. A rustling in the leaves drives him away” (91); in “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” “His prosody is comparable to the map of a big city in which it is possible to move about inconspicuously, shielded by blocks of houses, gateways, courtyards. On the map the places for the words are clearly indicated, as the places are indicated for conspirators before the outbreak of a revolt” (98); in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” “On a level with perception in dreams is the nature of temples” (189); and in Konvolut K of the “Arcades,” “just as [...] the noises and feelings of his insides, such as blood pressure, intestinal churn, heartbeat, and muscle sensation [...] generate [...] illusion or dream imagery [...], so likewise for the dreaming collective, which, through the arcades, communes with its own insides” (389). While any of these suggestions could be meaningfully reconciled, in each case the figural logic poses some serious, non-incidental problems for the semantic claims being proffered. In contradistinction, Samuel Weber, in “‘Streets, Squares, Theatres’: A City on the Move—Walter Benjamin's Paris,” finds Benjamin practicing a more challenging level of ambiguity: “Benjamin's description here recalls Marvell's ‘green thought in a grade [sic] shade,’ which William Empson analyzes as the highest, most complex form of the *Seven Types of Ambiguity*” (28). I suspect Weber means to cite *Some Versions of Pastoral*.

namely the recent proto-history, incipient potential, and developing legacy of industrialization and consumerism; and, third, a shift in the archive from texts primarily within the literary-philosophical tradition to objects taken almost entirely from material culture at large, such as architecture, fashion, and the media. This is partly explained by the influence of his Marxist-oriented Frankfurt Institute friends and funders, but no less by the inner logic of an already politicized project whose theoretical situation within the rapidly deteriorating conditions of contemporary consumer capitalism and political authoritarianism could never be adequately charted within literature and philosophy alone.

Nevertheless, what ties the Arcades-era writings to his earlier work and makes of Benjamin's thought an unbroken whole is an ongoing belief in the method of mystical-historical hermeneutics (the insinuation of privileged wholes from the proper constellation of merely partial historical objects) and a continuous reference to a messianic historical frame (in which a now-degraded experience is an affliction unique to the modern dispensation) as the appropriate protocol for critical investigation. Making the link between the mourning plays and the arcades explicit, Benjamin states in an exposé of 1935 that "[j]ust as in the seventeenth century it is allegory that becomes the canon of dialectical images, in the nineteenth century it is novelty" (*Arcades* 11). While the messianic eschatology remains somewhat submerged for most of the decade—until a final efflorescence in the "On the Concept of History"—it continues to underwrite the critical methodology: the decipherment of now-inaccessible higher truths or now-unavailable truer experiences via their residual traces in the "dialectical images" of this world.

Benjamin initiates this quasi-spiritual hermeneutics of a bygone era's arcane signs in the earliest completed drafts of the Arcades Project, which insist on a secret, suggestive language of the Paris arcades. The three main texts, in addition to an early set of notebooks (convolutes), are:

1) a short sketch from 1927 (possibly co-written with then collaborator Franz Hessel) employing an imaginary stroll through a new arcade to reflect on the heyday of old arcades; 2) a set of aphoristic reflections from 1928 or 1929 expanding on the themes touched on in the previous work; and 3) a brief sketch also from 1928 or 1929 expanding on one particular theme, entitled “The Ring of Saturn, or, Some Remarks on Iron Construction.”¹³ Cumulatively these works inventory the now petrified life of the arcades and make claims for their particular interest. In the 1927 sketch, imaginary window-shopping through a new arcade brings to mind the “dazzling light and shadowy corners” of old arcades where “[a]ntiquated trades survive” (871). The reader is directed to a few objects of interest there and taken on a fun-house tour of the decayed and outdated remains of past tenants.¹⁴

The primary theoretical burden of this sketch, however, is to figure the original functions and meanings of these vestigial, “aborted” remains as a lost language: “the merchandise on display is unintelligible, or else has several meanings. Already the inscriptions and signs on the entranceways [...], already the inscriptions which multiply along the walls within, [...] already they have about them something enigmatic. [...] These insistent letterings want to say more” (874, 871). Here no clue is given to the possible meanings thus encoded. And while the other two early texts propagate this linguistic mystery—the arcades’ signage exhibits “a precipitate of all the forms of writing that have ever been in use in the West” (876) and its “items on display are a rebus; and <how> one ought to read here [...] is right on the tip of one’s tongue” (874-875)—they stay within the mode of thematic accumulation, considerably expanding the range of objects

¹³ The history of these texts is given in their respective headnotes (based on the original German edition by Rolf Tiedemann) in *The Arcades Project*, where they are grouped as “Early Drafts.”

¹⁴ This virtual tour owes a debt to the opening of Emile Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin*, acknowledged by Benjamin in the early Konvoluts: the novel “—by no accident—takes places in an arcade. If this book really expounds something scientifically, then it’s the death of the Paris arcades, the decay of a type of architecture” (875).

with potentially unrevealed significance: relevant technologies (glass, cast iron, gaslight); relevant activities (consumerism, advertising, prostitution, gambling, flânerie, fashion, collecting); related spaces (winter gardens, railroad stations, hangars, dioramas, post-Haussmann avenues, world exhibitions); related artists (Hoffmann, Zola, Doyle, Baudelaire, Redon, Hofmannsthal, Aragon, Breton, Proust, Grandville, Offenbach).

Similarly, the piece on iron has little theoretical armature, offering simply “some scattered reflections,” as if for an encyclopedia article, on the nineteenth-century’s development and uses of iron: a picture from Grandville’s *Another World* (*Un Autre Monde*, 1844) leads to mostly empirical, associative reflection on gas light, winter gardens, arcades, covered markets, railroad stations, exhibition halls, iron rails, bridges and tunnels, household iron items, Eiffel’s tower, and the reactionary Jugendstil (885). These early writings are almost entirely absorbed into the later Arcades materials, offering by themselves little guidance as to the actual decipherment to be attempted. What is implicit, however, is that this secret language will not reveal itself to be a historically contingent cultural semiotics of a kind familiar to contemporary criticism, but rather will be a speech overheard from a spectral realm of collective dreaming.

Eavesdropping on this trans-historical communication is the task of the Benjaminian dialectician. His method is to tune into the frequency of such collective thought and, as in *Origin*, to identify and aptly constellate those objects (now known as “dream images”) vibrating on it, to achieve “genuine liberation” by “rous[ing] the kitsch of the previous century to ‘assembly’” (883). Under the care and regard of such a critic, a historical object, like a Parisian arcade which served as “the drawing room” of one collective (879),

is felt to be concretized in this [the critic’s] situation itself and upraised from its former being into the higher concretion of now-being <Jetztsein>. In what way *this* now-being

(which is something other than the now-being of the present time <Jetztzeit>) already signifies, in itself, a higher concretion—this question, of course, can be entertained by the dialectical method only within the purview of a philosophy of history that at all points has overcome the ideology of progress. In regard to such a philosophy, one could speak of an increasing concentration (integration) of reality, such that everything past (in its time) can acquire a higher grade of actuality than it had in the moment of its existing. How it adapts to this, its own higher actuality, is something determined and brought to pass by the image as which and in which it is comprehended. (857)

This statement, transferred from the earliest convolutes with only cosmetic modifications to the later convolutes, takes as axiomatic the existence of, at a minimum, three levels of existence or awareness: a least-concrete everyday awareness of the present time's now-being, of no critical interest; a more-concretized, "concentrat[ed]," "higher" sense of the present time's now-being accessible through the dialectician's "comprehen[sion]" of a previous time's historical "image"; and beyond this a potentially higher or highest, even-more-concretized, even-more-concentrated level, presumably one disclosing humanity's (non-"progress"ive) transcendental journey.

The relay between the lower two realms is via the object charged with the collective's dreams, like a decayed arcade become an "underworld—a land full of inconspicuous places from which dreams arise," a significance better intuited in regressive states such as the flâneur's "anamnesic intoxication" or "boredom" (875, 880, 881). And the requisite critical activity is to enable an awakening: in the later convolutes Benjamin parenthetically glosses the higher "now-being" of the above quotation as "(waking being!)." Facilitating such "awakening" is the cornerstone of Benjamin's "new, dialectical method of doing history[, which] teaches us to pass in spirit—with the rapidity and intensity of dreams—through what has been, in order to

experience the present as waking world, a world to which every dream at least refers” (884). While the ambiguous “with” in this statement could, out of context, suggest that “collective dreaming” is merely Benjamin’s vague simile for social development (reading “with” as “like with”), there is little doubt about Benjamin’s literalism here, that for him these spectral dreams are a crucially determinative overlay to material history (reading “with” as “together or as with”). I will return later to this metaphysical methodology, as well as to its Marx-esque conception as “no longer historical but political” (857).

This cultural-critical methodology continues to be visible in the next draft document of the Arcades work, a 1935 exposé, entitled “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century” (“Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX Jahrhunderts”), prepared after a break of five years to secure, from the exiled Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, an increase in funding that would sustain the project on a full-time basis in Paris. This exposé, looking towards eventual publication of a monograph, winnows down the mass of objects inventoried in the earliest drafts and consolidates them under six provisional headings, while also bringing into clearer focus the already-glimpsed theoretical framework. Just as the title proffers a correspondence between Paris and presumably the entire world of the nineteenth century, each of the six section titles suggests a correspondence between a single historical figure of the French nineteenth century and a significant material feature of nineteenth-century Paris’s built environment: “Fourier, or the Arcades,” “Daguerre, or the Panoramas,” “Grandville, or the World Exhibitions,” “Louis Philippe, or the Interior,” “Baudelaire, or the Streets of Paris,” “Haussmann, or the Barricades.” The articulation of the correspondence is of course variable, and given Benjamin’s intellectual proclivities, the contingent adjacency of the person named to the historical circumstance or innovation named—a large portion of the text is an empirical miscellany of various “firsts” manifest in nineteenth-

century Paris¹⁵—is meant to be sufficiently illuminating as to the necessary link between the historical event and the personage.

In broad strokes, the exposé suggests: the posited utopianism of the shopping arcades is akin to the utopianism of Fourier’s arcade-shaped phalansteries; Daguerre’s biographical transition from painter of panoramas in the arcades to photographic innovator grounds the relation between the two forms of realism (and sociology and impressionism); Grandville’s citation of modern commodity objects in his fantastical cosmology parallels the worship of the universe of commodities in the world exhibitions (and fashion and Saint-Simonianism); Louis Philippe’s bourgeois-backed reign is correlated with the bourgeois tendency toward disengaging private and public spaces and activities (and collecting and detective fiction); Baudelaire’s urban thematics, alienated *flânerie*, and confused professional status align him with the confused political agitations of proximately bohemian political conspirators and his modernist aesthetic aligns him with both the retrogressive aestheticism of *l’art pour l’art* and the buried collective utopianism of commodity culture; and finally Haussmann’s idealist architectonics is presented as another front in the class war between the barricade-building proletarian revolutionaries and the strong, centralized administration of Napoleon III (and imperialism and market speculation).

All of these sections delimit viable routes for unfolding the complex interrelations between the cultural, the social, and the political history of nineteenth-century Paris, even if their

¹⁵ This proclivity for questionable historical hyperbole is particularly pronounced in this exposé: “the first establishments to”; “the first gas lighting”; “For the first time in the history of architecture”; “the first prefabricated iron component”; “the first appearance of the panoramas”; “For the last time, the worker appears”; “for the first time, the lens was deemed”; “for the first time a special display”: “the first of which takes place”; “the first physiognomist of the domestic interior”; “It is the unique provision” (3-13). But it is not limited to it; in “The Storyteller,” for example, Benjamin claims, “Never has a storyteller embedded his report deeper in natural history than Hebel manages to do in this chronology” (95). Such hyperbole is particularly vulnerable to historical error and empirical correction, so, for example, to the claim that iron was the first “artificial building material,” Adorno rejoins “(what about bricks!)” (Adorno and Benjamin, *Corresp.* 109).

vastness of interests invite skepticism about the possibility of a unified treatment and even if the apparent unconcern for the sheer force of historical contingency and inexpressible complexity of social systems invite worry about Benjamin's passion for correspondence. Unfortunately, Benjamin's solution is to continue to employ the trope of dreaming to model the critic's work. What is currently asleep is the ameliorative potential that the arcades supposedly revealed to the collective that witnessed their birth, a collective that sought "in them [...] both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production" (4). The promise encoded in the arcades—as a dream or as a wish—for a less treacherous relation to industry, a new direction for capitalism, is apparent as well, for Benjamin, in the defamiliarizing practice of the bourgeois collector, who similarly "dreams his way not only into a distant or bygone world but also into a better one—one in which, to be sure, human beings are no better provided with what they need than in the everyday world, but in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful" (9). It goes without saying that these hopes were eclipsed by the actual unfolding of the market economy, that "[t]he development of the forces of production shattered the wish symbols of the previous century" (13). The critic's investigation, however, can unlock this buried potential, this dream of "the collective unconscious"; it can release the Idea of the arcades in a manner akin to that of the resuscitating of the Idea of the mourning play—that is, by properly considering and constellating materials of these "dream images" via a method observant of the paradoxical "law of dialectics at a standstill" (11, 10).

The Benjaminian critic intuits, for example, that the arcades "are residues of a dream world," relicts of a moment when industrial productivity's "wish symbols" could still "linger on the threshold" before fully "entering the market as commodities" (13). The impetus for the

“Arcades” research project, then, is a critical activation of the bypassed potential of this moment of situational “ambiguity,” a recognition that “[t]his stillstand is utopia” (10). Yet, since this project was meant to satisfy the substantive and rhetorical demands of a recently-solidified Marxist affiliation,¹⁶ the accustomed rhetoric of “awakening” shares space with a more committed rhetoric. Alongside the idealist emphasis on the encoded utopian possibilities of social and technological innovation, there is now a complementary critical emphasis on the obfuscation hindering their realization, on the various “phantasmagoria” generated and enforced by capitalism. This term borrowed from Marx is applied to world exhibitions (7), the world exhibition of 1867 in particular (8), the bourgeois domestic interior (9), the crowded city (10), bourgeois cultural history (11), the temporality of gambling, and proletarian-bourgeois cooperation (12).¹⁷ However, Benjamin’s theoretical concurrence that the critic’s task entails dissolving the phantasmagorias obscuring the true nature of capitalism attends an analysis not of a material social substrate but of a realm of mystical operations suggested by the figure of the “fetish”: Benjamin pressures Marx’s hyperbolic characterization of the commodity’s “theological niceties” into his own quite distinct theoretical scheme (7).

¹⁶ The well-known personal influences driving this identification include romantic interest in Latvian communist Asja Lacis, friendship with Brecht, and colloquy with Adorno.

¹⁷ By the revised exposé of 1939, “phantasmagoria” will be the dominant organizing concept, not least of all for its camouflaged Marxism, given the American audience for which that exposé was prepared (cf. the scrubbing of Marx out of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* not too soon after). Margaret Cohen, in “Walter Benjamin’s Phantasmagoria,” provides a detailed and generally critique-free genealogy of Benjamin’s usage, placating her mild unease over “the mystifying ends” to which the indeterminate line “between mystifying and critical (illuminating) phantasmagorias” can be put with the mystifying thought that “perhaps this very danger indicates its [his concept’s] vitality” (90, 107). Adorno employs “phantasmagoria” most distinctively in his critique of Wagner in “Fragmente über Wagner” (1939) and *In Search of Wagner* (1952) arguing in the “Phantasmagoria” chapter of the latter that “the basis of the primacy of harmonic and instrumental sound in his music” is a tendency towards phantasmagoric occultation of its own production (74-75). The former essay is cited by Benjamin at the end of Konvolut X on “Marx” (669).

In the drafts and published Arcades materials, then, the discovery of phantasmagoria does not prompt a Marxist parsing of modes and relations of production, or a search for the roots of social and economic inequality, but instead a preparation for a cultural awakening that bears, however uncertainly, revolutionary significance for the post-capitalist future:

The realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking. Thus, dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it—as Hegel already noticed—by cunning. With the destabilizing of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled. (13)

Marx's disclosure of capitalism's self-delusion underwrites Benjamin's deeply delusional suggestion that it is actually dying, an inevitable ruin. Benjamin bypasses again any engagement with historical contingencies or political economy and provides a speedy, undialectical relay back to the concerns of a theological meta-narrative in which the inquiry originated: a "primal history" whence obtained a "classless society" to which the nineteenth-century collective's imagination is "wedded" (4). Even though Benjamin no longer explicitly references the messianic historiography and political theory of *Origin*, it is clear that the stakes of his project can be considered, at best, cosmetically Marxist, authorized by Marxism's flawed prospective messianic-utopian vistas and not its trenchant retrospective ideological-critical regard. That Benjamin is not a Marxist is not my main point, however.¹⁸ The chief emphasis here will be on

¹⁸ Though it is undeniable that in Benjamin's supposed Marxist turn, the materialist's vocabulary of a dynamic dialectics consistently fails to correspond to the static historical vision. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels cast a resonant verdict on Feuerbach in *The German Ideology*: "As far as Feuerbach is a materialist he does not deal with history, and as far as he considers history he is not a materialist. With him materialism and history diverge completely" (171-172).

the ways that his messianism makes him an unsophisticated reader of the literature of modernity, particularly Baudelaire.

Benjamin's Reception

Decades of worshipful and imprecise writing on Benjamin make seeing the inadequacy of Benjamin's Baudelaire difficult.¹⁹ As a guide, I take Arendt as an unexhausted (indeed rarely attempted) model for genuine critique. For example, in "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940," she offers an unstintingly unsentimental account of *Origin's* failure in light of Benjamin's boast that the book embodied "the craziest mosaic technique" (8). Arendt avers that "[t]ruly, neither anti-Semitism nor ill will toward an outsider [...] nor the customary academic suspicion of anything that is not guaranteed to be mediocre need have been involved" in explaining the book's rejection. Such candor is rare in work on Benjamin. Arendt is also incisive, and not merely indulgent, on Benjamin's intellectual idiosyncrasies.²⁰ For example, she notes Benjamin's torsion of the Marxist base-superstructure model into a quite incompatible base-*Urphänomen* relation:

Benjamin used this doctrine [of the superstructure] only as a heuristic-methodological stimulus and was hardly interested in its historical or philosophical background. What

¹⁹ Jeffrey Grossman, in "The Reception of Walter Benjamin in the Anglo-American Literary Institution," sketches some key scenes in Benjamin's Anglophone academic reception. He notes how willfully "critics select certain texts, emphasize certain concepts [...] and certain definitions of those concepts, for which they can generally find justification in some moment(s) of his writing" (426). Udi E. Greenberg, in "The Politics of the Walter Benjamin Industry," offers a critique of Benjamin's reception in intellectual culture more broadly. At his most provocative, Greenberg suggests that Saul Friedländer's critique of the kitsch-ification of Hitler offers a model for understanding how "the political signifier 'Benjamin' acquired its unique appeal, and its status of cultural icon" (67). These essays are constrained by the space accorded journal articles, but both could serve as cornerstones for a full account of Benjamin's reception.

²⁰ Similarly, T.J. Clark's "Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?" has a power to astonish merely by the serious consideration he is willing to give, in its closing moments, to "some of the things I feel it [*The Arcades Project*] leaves out or gets wrong" (45).

fascinated him about the matter was that the spirit and its material manifestation were so intimately connected that it seemed permissible to discover everywhere Baudelaire's *correspondances* [... T]his passion, far from being a whim, derived directly from the only world view that ever had a decisive influence on him, from Goethe's conviction of the factual existence of an *Urphänomen*. (11-12)

This observation provides great purchase on Benjamin's construal of Baudelaire as a minor tragic hero of an era denied access to such a transcendence. It also, incidentally, helps explain why the first line of "Der Schwan" ("Ich denke *dein*, Andromache!"), Benjamin's 1923 translation of Baudelaire's "The Swan" ("Le Cygne"), declines the formality of the original ("Andromaque, je pense à *vous*!") (my emphases, *Gesammelte* IV.1:17; *Œuvres* 85). Benjamin here chooses instead to echo the intimate, and thus incongruous, opening of Goethe's love lyric "Nähe des Geliebten," a lyric famously set to music by Schubert and Schumann.

Unfortunately, the tone of Benjamin criticism has been set more by critics such as Susan Buck-Morss. Through such works as 1977's *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*; the two parts in 1981 of "Walter Benjamin—Revolutionary Writer"; and 1983's "Benjamin's Passagen-Werk: Redeeming Mass Culture for the Revolution," Buck-Morss became a standard authority on Benjamin, in large part by offering a Benjamin metamorphosed into our political contemporary, a dedicated cultural radical in the utopian Marxist tradition, and the secret spring of what was best in the thought of Adorno.²¹ In part one of the 1981 essay, Buck-Morss writes, "Benjamin's choice of presenting

²¹ Gillian Rose, in a sharply critical review of Buck-Morss's *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, questions "the imputed importance of the influence of Benjamin" on Adorno, noting Adorno's "distance in the early 1930s from the views of Benjamin," most pointedly in "his dedication to the development of a Marxist and sociological aesthetic which did not rely on the illumination of 'historical images' or on 'the construction of constellations'" (129). Though I do not pursue it systematically, implausible claims for Adorno's intellectual indebtedness to Benjamin are a standard feature of the Benjamin hagiography.

ideas as dialectical images rather than concepts was neither aesthetic nor arbitrary, but clearly political. His theory of dialectical images, regardless of whether it was expressed in theological, metaphysical or Marxist terms, was consistently imbued with revolutionary politics. He kept his eyes on the vanishing point, and his interpreters would do well to follow suit” (60-61). While that vanishing point is clearly “revolutionary politics” for Buck-Morss, as in *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, her “inventive reconstruction” of the book she imagines Benjamin was writing, an examination of Benjamin’s writings would be hard pressed to place insight into political processes among his key accomplishments and should be hesitant to so quickly validate his investment in an irrationalism and metaphysics that would magically supersede temporal politicking merely because of an ideological sympathy for the general tenor of his work and shared antipathy for the objects of his critique.²² Terry Eagleton’s own Marxist “reclamation,” *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, another of the early influential Anglophone introductions to Benjamin, similarly admits its intention to “manhandle” Benjamin’s ideas “for [its] own purposes” (x, xi).

There may, indeed, be no better index of the injudicious reception of Benjamin than the collective assent granted his ruminations on Baudelaire. While Henri Peyre excluded an essay by “Walter Benjamin in German” from a 1962 volume of essays on Baudelaire on the grounds that it was “not judged to be so enlightening or so relevant as those which have been retained here,” by 1967 Richard Klein could claim in “Baudelaire and Revolution” that Benjamin’s “essay on Baudelaire is the most penetrating critical study of that author I have ever read [...]. His great subtlety makes me affirm rather uneasily that I am representing the general thrust of his

²² In contrast, Rolf Tiedemann in “Dialectics at a Standstill” notes critically that Benjamin’s “‘blasting’ the dialectical image ‘out of the continuum of the historical process’ (N 10a,3) was akin to that anarchistic impulse which tries to stop history during revolutions by instituting a new calendar, or by shooting at the church clocks, as during the Paris revolution” (287).

argument” (2; 88). Many familiar academic-cultural trends subtend the chasm between Peyre and Klein, but no successive academic fashion has much blunted the thrust of Klein’s judgment. In our current critical scene, those who wish to downplay Benjamin’s affiliation with the Frankfurt School will say along with Michael W. Jennings that “Benjamin’s first major work on Baudelaire is one of the greatest essays of literary criticism from the twentieth century” (Introduction 2). And those who wish to bolster the affiliation will say along with Robert Kaufman in his 2008 essay “Lyric Commodity Critique, Benjamin Adorno Marx, Baudelaire Baudelaire” that, rather, Benjamin’s second essay on Baudelaire, revised in dialogue with Theodor Adorno, “is widely regarded as one of the great twentieth-century essays on modern poetry, social analysis, and critical theory” (213).

Accordingly, in an analysis of the frequency of author citations in *Critical Inquiry* from 1974 to 2004, “The Footnote, in Theory,” Anne H. Stevens and Jay Williams reveal that Benjamin was the fourth most cited author (trailing only Derrida, Freud, and Foucault) but note that among major authors cited in that journal, “it is our guess that perhaps only Benjamin’s works are cited nonargumentatively” (223). Indeed, considering the often heated and sometimes productive debates that swirl around the genealogies, texts, and legacies of Derrida, Freud, and Foucault, the tendentiousness with which Benjamin has been engaged is remarkable. Stevens and Williams hope that “perhaps sometime soon someone will critique Benjamin, initiating a new direction in theoretical discussions.” Yet so far, the most popular debates surrounding Benjamin have wrangled over proprietorship of his legacy, and not the content of his thought.

Take, as exemplary of the Anglophone reception of Benjamin, Jennings’ *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Literary Criticism*. This study provides a lucid account of Benjamin’s assumptions and operations as a reader. Jennings’ clarity about the persistence of a

dialectic of nihilism and mystical redemption in all stages of Benjamin's intellectual career offers a well-considered warning to materialists and nonfoundationalists alike who would turn to Benjamin for analytical tools. Jennings concludes in the "hope that this study will give some readers pause as they" "raid[] Benjamin's works for sentences and concepts" (212). Still, Jennings calls Benjamin's first essay on Baudelaire "one of our most authoritative social readings of modern lyric poetry," an effort in which "Baudelaire is seen for the first time as the quintessential modern—alienated, spatially displaced, saturnine" (21). Even while he acknowledges some of its "weaker juxtapositions," Jennings praises the essay as "constructed according to a rigorous structural principle" (32, 26). I will go on to disagree with this assessment, but what I want to note for now is the marginalization of Baudelaire's literary texts in *Dialectical Images*. Jennings quotes only one line of one Baudelaire poem in the book, and that line is quoted and translated incorrectly.²³

This lack of corroboration takes for granted that, in all important respects, Benjamin got Baudelaire "right." It is worth emphasizing how commonly appreciations of Benjamin's literary criticism disregard in this manner the literature being criticized. Baudelaire, at least, is a significant cultural presence in the Anglophone world, frequently translated and always in print, often in dual-language editions. However, the seventeenth-century German playwrights who are the chief subject of Benjamin's earlier *Origin of the German Mourning Play* are not so readily available. Of the major baroque tragedies, a determined search reveals only abridged translations of Andreas Gryphius' *Leo Armenius* (1646, published 1650) and Daniel Casper von Lohenstein's *Sophonisbe* (1669, published 1680) in The Continuum Publishing Company's *The German*

²³ Baudelaire did not write "'Tout autour de moi devient allégorie' (Everything around me becomes allegory)" (174). "The Swan" actually reads "tout pour moi." The point here is not that Jennings does not know his Baudelaire; it is that he does not seem to worry about what the poet might say in response to the critic.

Library series. Additionally, Gryphius's short comedy *Die geliebte Dornrose* (1660), itself half of a larger dramatic unit, was translated as *The Beloved Hedgerose* in a 1928 issue of the journal *Poet Lore*. I have located no translations of plays by Martin Opitz or Johann Christian Hallmann. This dearth of translations is evident in the odd but frequent spectacle of literary scholars extolling and expanding upon Benjamin's literary-critical insights in *Origin* without adducing any apparent independent familiarity with or concern for the actual plays. Jennings, in neither quoting nor citing any of them, is not alone among careful readers of Benjamin.

Samuel Weber has written two remarkably clarifying essays on the mourning play book: "Genealogy of Modernity" and "Taking Exception to Decision." Both, however, are pure exegesis and resolution of Benjamin's method. Weber finds sense in every ambiguity, method in every contradiction, and logic in every figuration. He thus contravenes the ethos of deconstruction, not least in so confidently forwarding Benjamin's insights without a single textual reference to a German mourning play, thus implicitly placing Benjamin's "philosophical" commentary on a higher epistemological plane than the literary texts that occasion it.²⁴ In a similar manner, Rainer Nägele in "The Poetic Ground Laid Bare (Benjamin Reading Baudelaire)" is content to resolve all of Benjamin's moves into a consistent, even super-subtle, literary critical method—the reader will early find Benjamin submitting to "a rigorous epistemological necessity that allows for a fundamental ground *only* in a theological discourse" (my emphasis)—and, like Weber, does so without much concern for the literary text (two lines

²⁴ In perhaps the most famous attempted rapprochement between Benjamin and deconstruction, Paul de Man in his lecture "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'"—after announcing that "in the profession you are nobody unless you have said something about ['The Task of the Translator']"—insists that any "messianic themes" readers encounter in this text (and that he admits he himself constantly re-encounters) must be explained away by a "very difficult" "attentive reading" ("it takes really a long practice") predicated upon a belief in Benjamin's "extraordinarily refined and deliberate strategy," a strategy of "echoing" but then somehow "displacing" these themes (73, 103). A deconstructive regard for and deference to the deliberateness of a writer's intended strategy is incongruous, to say the least.

totaling fourteen words are given from Baudelaire) (148). Unlike Weber's exegesis, Nägele's argument does not even carefully engage Benjamin's texts, spending more time decoding a subversive "hint" in the title of the second Baudelaire essay and exploring Benjamin's supposed metatheoretical borrowings from Nietzsche, Freud, and Bergson than it does examining Benjamin's actual conceptual maneuvers (149). And unlike Weber's graceful handling of abstractions, Nägele ornaments his essay with such baroque touches as "a graphematic model of reflexive motility inscribing physiognomic traits" (158).

Even though cogent critiques of Benjamin are available, often from European scholars, these have not been systematically elaborated upon. Indeed, literary critics who do not concern themselves with exploring the consonance between Benjamin's criticism and the literary objects of that criticism still regularly engage in heated denunciations of those who address problematic aspects of Benjamin's approach. An extraordinary example is Françoise Meltzer's excoriation of Hannah Arendt in "Acedia and Melancholy." Meltzer, for her part, denounces Arendt for contemplating impassés in Benjamin's thought and life. She revels in unveiling Arendt's rather naked assessment that Benjamin was (in Meltzer's breathless paraphrase) "politically naïve and at times unreliable" and "eccentric and inconsistent (if brilliant)" (161, 151). It is clear that, for Meltzer, Benjamin simply cannot be subjected to the kind of skepticism that she subjects Arendt quite strangely and remorselessly to: she insults Arendt's critique as "bizarre," "irritat[ed]," "shrill[ly]," and "misogynist," but never meets the basic obligation of offering any evidence that Arendt is in any way wrong (142, 143, 144, 151).²⁵ Benjamin's profundity is axiomatic; he offers

²⁵ Two additional comments: First, I note the irony of accusing a woman of misogyny by calling her "shrill." Second, in a recent review of Arendt's Jewish writings, "I Merely Belong to Them," Judith Butler underlines the misunderstandings to which Arendt's sincerity makes her liable by those with more sentimental or romantic worldviews, noting Gershom Scholem's hostile reaction to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: "Scholem went on to impugn Arendt's personal motives: 'In the Jewish tradition there is a concept, hard to define and yet concrete enough, which we know as *Ahabath Israel*: 'Love of the Jewish

not a text to be read, but a life-work to be decoded. An attentive reading of Benjamin, however, would obviously find many counterexamples to Meltzer's claim that he offered "unimpugned praise" for Baudelaire (151).

Meltzer is also critical of Fredric Jameson's thoughtfully ambivalent take on Benjamin, citing Jennings for support (151). Jameson in "Benjamin's Readings" approves of Benjamin's "deep formal suspicions of narratives as such," praising his notion of constellations for disrupting conventional historical narration, claiming that it "is not ammunition against history and referentiality but rather a way of sustaining these values against narrative representation, in all its sheer fictionality" (34). Like many Marxist critics, Jameson strategically centers his reading here upon the negative half of Benjamin's thought, the critique (conventional for the Frankfurt School) of historical positivism.²⁶ In *Marxism and Form*, however, Jameson is willing to consider the possibility that some of "Benjamin's conclusions remain problematical," especially those derailed by a powerful nostalgia: "where we thought to emerge into the historical present, in reality we plunge again into the distant past of psychological obsession" (81, 82). Jameson notes cogently that "Benjamin's work seems to me to be marked by a painful

people". In you, dear Hannah, as in so many intellectuals who came from the German left, I find little trace of this" (26).

²⁶ Two other appreciations of Benjamin's refusals (anthropocentric historicisms) that do not quite come to terms with his alternatives (angelocentric messianisms): Beatrice Hanssen notes in "Philosophy at its Origins: Walter Benjamin's Prologue to the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*" that "while Benjamin's conception of the work's natural history, at a remove from human history, may not be entirely free of the idealism that characterized the tradition of philosophical aesthetics, one can nonetheless discern in it what could perhaps best be described as the ethico-theological call for a different kind of history, one no longer purely anthropocentric in nature, nor anchored solely in the concerns of a human subject" (829). Ian Balfour in "Legacies of Paul de Man History against Historicism, Formal Matters, and the Event of the Text: De Man with Benjamin" likewise overvalues Benjamin for rejecting conventional historicism: "Like the violence of quotation, this negatively dialectical model of text and reading wrenches the text, momentarily, from the homogenizing, totalizing, containing narratives within which literary history likes to enfold it" (par. 19).

straining toward a psychic wholeness or unity of experience which the historical situation threatens to shatter at every turn” (61).

In a later essay, “The Theoretical Hesitation: Benjamin’s Sociological Predecessor,” Jameson appears even more circumspect about Benjamin’s historical idealizations, noting of Benjamin’s reception, that “[i]t has always mildly surprised me, for instance, that in this time, which is supremely characterized by its resistance to any and all conceptions of an original or primordial human nature as such, the omnipresent traces of a seemingly humanist doctrine of experience [...] have not seemed in the least to discredit his work” (268-269). And in *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson suggests that Benjamin’s materialist analysis of Baudelaire may belong to the “billiard-ball model of cause and effect” (25). In *Dialectical Images*, Jennings criticizes Jameson for offering “a strong misreading” of Benjamin’s nostalgia and displaying “a serious misunderstanding of Benjamin’s method” (9, 34). Jennings avers that “[c]loser reading might have found elements in Benjamin’s theory that are essentially indistinguishable from the symbolic operations at the heart of Jameson’s own mode.” The reader has to take this on faith, again, since no such closer reading is offered. This unequivocal dismissal is even more unwarranted given Jameson’s quite equivocal take on the “billiard-ball model,” one encouraging his readers to undertake “a reexamination of this type of causality” and to consider its possible “purely local validity” (25).

Critiques of Jameson are usually predicated, in turn, upon entrenched polemics against Adorno’s objections to Benjamin’s cultural analyses. Indeed, defenders of Benjamin are rarely more exercised than when evaluating Benjamin’s relations with the members of the Institute for Social Research. The Institute’s editorial hand is regularly taken as a desecration of Benjamin’s purer vision, and the epistolary exchange between Adorno and Benjamin is regularly reduced to

the level of a good soap opera or a bad tragic drama. Jennings is, again, exemplary. Rather than engaging with the substance or possible validity of Adorno's critique, in *Dialectical Images* Jennings instead casts Adorno as Eve Harrington to Benjamin's Margo Channing: "By the late 1930s, however, Adorno's own intellectual accomplishments led to a change in tone and a perhaps necessary denial of Benjamin's influence on his thought" (30-31). He also, in his essay "On the Banks of a New Lethe: Commodification and Experience in Benjamin's Baudelaire Book," sensationalizes the Institute's routine demand for revisions (essentially a "revise and resubmit") as a process of "dizzing reductions to which *The Arcades* material was subjected" and speaks stirringly (when discussing the pruning of a baggy 90-page essay) of "more or less violent excisions of material from the larger corpus of the Baudelaire book" (93). Such melodramatic rhetoric usually results from blurring the life with the work and makes it harder to accurately assess either life or work, Adorno's or Benjamin's.²⁷

Barbara Johnson—within an otherwise very fine collation of the theories of reification and alienation in an essay in *Mother Tongues*—perpetuates the myth of Adorno's uncomprehending presumptuousness. She offers the drama of the visionary, proto-deconstructive Benjamin battling the doctrinaire, vulgarly-Marxist Adorno.²⁸ For example, she reproves Adorno's supposed obliviousness in "claiming [... Benjamin] was productive 'in spite of self-alienation'" (her emphasis) in his essay "Benjamin the Letter Writer," when the context of that

²⁷ On this point, Greenberg notes how problematically, in the work of what he calls "the Benjamin industry," "the biographical narrative becomes inseparable from the intellectual heritage" (67).

²⁸ Despite this common charge of imposing Marx, Adorno counseled Benjamin entirely otherwise: "God knows, there is only one truth, and if your powers of intelligence can seize this one truth through categories which may seem apocryphal to you given your conception of materialism, then you will capture more of this one truth than you will ever do by employing conceptual tools that merely resist your grip at every turn. After all, there is more of this one truth in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* than there is in Bukharin's *ABC of Communism*" (Adorno and Benjamin, *Corresp.* 284). All this makes even odder Johnson's taunt that "Adorno sometimes found [Benjamin's thought] more dialectical than he could handle" (118).

phrase (even in the translation Johnson cites) makes it unambiguous that Adorno credited Benjamin's productivity *to* his self-alienation (98). Shierry Weber Nicholsen's superior translation of this phrase ("[d]ie Produktivität des sich selbst Entfremdeten") in "Benjamin, der Briefschreiber" as "[t]he productivity of this person estranged from himself" makes Johnson's basic error plain ("Briefschreiber" 14; "Letter Writer" 233-234). In the same vein, Johnson infers that Adorno's call for "'mediation' between economic features and social history implies that the two domains are distinct and that there is a middle ground between them," when, in fact, Adorno's sense of mediation as needing to account for "the *total process*" (his emphasis) clearly implies otherwise (105).²⁹ This recurrent image of Adorno's theoretical meanness (in multiple senses) is bolstered by a misapprehension of basic philological details that reifies Benjamin's scholarly achievements. Johnson speaks approvingly of "*Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (1938)," a book that was less than half written and for which "1938" is thus an arbitrary ascription. She decries the "rejection of *The Arcades Project*," an act that never happened, since no such thing as an "*Arcades Project*" manuscript ever existed, in spite of the italics here (94, 117). Johnson does not mention that Adorno and the Frankfurt Institute funded the "Paris Arcades" research project and published the revised Baudelaire essay, among others by Benjamin.

Because of his characteristically piercing responses to Benjamin's idealisms, Adorno is regularly reduced to a stock villain's role in the Benjamin legend. George Steiner goes so far as to insinuate darkly (and entirely speculatively) that the "sterile" relation with "the Horkheimer-Adorno Institute" prevented Benjamin from aligning with "the Aby Warburg group" from whom

²⁹ "Die materialistische Determination kultureller Charaktere ist möglich nur vermittelt durch den *Gesamtprozeß*" (Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel* 367; The materialist determination of cultural traits is possible only if mediated through the *total process*). Adorno's rhetoric clearly demands the same attention to a socio-economic gestalt as attempted in the third book of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, subtitled *Der Gesamtprozeß der kapitalistischen Produktion* (1894).

“an invitation to London might have averted his early death” (19). Even the extraordinarily shrewd Judith Butler, in her essay “Values of Difficulty” that critiques “common sense,” reproduces academic “common knowledge” of Adorno’s injury to Benjamin. Especially unwarranted is her speculation that Adorno “withholds work and payment and even delays their correspondence precisely at the moment in which Benjamin’s livelihood and life are imperiled” (211-212). Her defense of what she takes to be Benjamin’s method becomes entangled with her defense of Benjamin’s life, of “the evanescence, if not the ineffability, of a life” (214). I have no wish to defend Adorno here. My point is that that the vast majority of those who censure him do so on the basis of little more than decontextualized readings of a small, popular selection of his correspondence with Benjamin. In fact, Butler’s approbation of Benjamin’s method as one in which “the concept appears to become articulated only through its disarticulation as a figure,” appears to be based not on a reading of his criticism but only his own self-appraisal in these letters (213-214).

Such uncritical and imprecise deployments of Benjamin have become routinized in contemporary literary-critical discourse. Elissa Marder’s “Flat Death: Snapshots of History” serves as a final example. At one point, addressing Benjamin’s mistaken reference to “A Woman Passerby”’s titular character as a widow, Marder concedes that “there is nothing in the poem to indicate that the mourning woman is a ‘widow’” (75). This imposition should be troubling to a literary critic, yet Marder insists nonetheless that Benjamin’s fabrication leads us to see how the poem “presents a vision of modernity that is permeated by the decay of history” (76). This is not in any way a reading of the Baudelaire sonnet (Baudelaire’s modernity does not present a “decay of history”), but merely a replication of Benjamin’s theory of history and his longstanding account of modernity. That is, Benjamin’s explicit misreading is rationalized because it validates

Benjamin's theory, based upon the faith that Benjamin got Baudelaire "right." The entire Baudelaire section of Marder's book is vexed by such circularity, as when she calls Hans Robert Jauss's critique of Benjamin "wrong" (71). Jauss has written convincingly on Benjamin's misconstruction—rooted in "wholly unexplicated" allusions to Victor Hugo and Charles Meryon—of Baudelaire's theory of modern art. In "Reflections on the Chapter 'Modernity' in Benjamin's Baudelaire Fragments," Jauss asks us to consider how "Benjamin [...] turns the *functional* relationship of modernity and antiquity back into an opposition of *content*" (179).³⁰ Marder declines from "entering into the specifics" of Jauss's quite rigorous exposition, instead arraigning Jauss's supposed error "in order to stress the fact that Benjamin's argument is anything but self-evident" (71). That is, a critique of Benjamin's theory is wrong because it fails to validate the complexity of Benjamin's theory. History—especially the historicity of Baudelaire's literary text—does not perturb the closed circuitry of Marder's criticism machine.

We now inhabit a situation where Benjamin is regularly taken by literary critics as beyond critical reproach. A return to Benjamin's and Baudelaire's actual words is long overdue, as is a serious engagement with sympathetic critiques of Benjamin. Adorno, Arendt, Jauss, and Jameson represent critics who honor the resoluteness with which Benjamin refuses his culture's phantasmagorias, but who do not allow themselves to ignore the chimeras he offers instead. Adorno is uncompromising on this point in his "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin": "His target is not an allegedly overinflated subjectivism but rather the notion of a subjective dimension itself. Between myth and reconciliation, the poles of his philosophy, the subject evaporates. Before his

³⁰ Of equal interest is another Jauss essay, "Tradition, Innovation, and Aesthetic Experience," which examines aporias in Benjamin's theory of constellations. Within his idiom of reception theory, Jauss (similarly to Adorno) notes Benjamin's lack of mediation between cultural objects and historical theory, since "where the shift occurs from the aesthetic to the political, a theological paradigm was called on for assistance: the messianic freezing of the event." In "Tradition, Innovation, and Aesthetic Experience" (385).

Medusan glance, man turns into the stage on which an objective process unfolds. For this reason Benjamin's philosophy is no less a source of terror than a promise of happiness" (235). In this recognition of Benjamin's catastrophism, of his disregard for the human subject, the human condition, and (mostly importantly for our purposes) human cultural objects, Adorno anticipates the "shudder" of a reader no less scrupulous than Jacques Derrida. At the far end of a careful and caring deconstruction of Benjamin's notion of "divine violence" in "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" a "terrified" Derrida finds himself forced to condemn Benjamin's thought as "too messianico-marxist or archeo-eschatological for me," as "resembl[ing] too closely [...] the very thing against which one must act and think, do and speak" (1045). While it may be difficult to read Benjamin without a wish to redeem his liberatory cultural-political project or without a regard to the darkness of his end, these tendencies, ultimately, distort understandings of his work and strengthen "the 'sad hero of the age of Fascism' flavor that makes so much of the Benjamin literature," as T. J. Clark candidly notes, "unbearable" (45).

As a final gesture in this attempt to underline and upset the hierarchy that unaccountably places Benjamin the reflective critic-philosopher above Baudelaire the animal poet-creator, I want to in the next chapter compactly stage an unexpected and revealing correspondence between Baudelaire's "The Swan" and the ninth aphorism of Benjamin's "On the Concept of History." I hope to dramatize the most salient distinctions between them and attempt a reassessment of Benjamin's historical vision. "The Swan" serves here not only because it is among Baudelaire's best-known lyrics, but also because it is central for Benjamin's reading of the poet. Among other roles, lines from the poem provide the epigraph to the Baudelaire section of both exposés for the "Arcades" project. More importantly, the poem's thematic and theoretical

content provide a resonant counter-concept of history. Both the poem and the aphorism feature incapacitated winged creatures, debris, bad weather, and, most strikingly, a speaker who stands in the present, considers the past, and ponders the endurance of human disaster. The ethics and aesthetics that emerge in Baudelaire's lyric could not be more inhospitable to Benjamin's messianism.

CHAPTER 4:

Baudelaire without Benjamin, Lyric without Oracularity:

An Ethics and Aesthetics of Contingency

Benjamin on Baudelaire: The Two Essays

Adorno, in 1936, seems to have been the first to propose that an essay on Baudelaire, to be formally commissioned by Max Horkheimer for the *Journal of Social Research* (*Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*), form the first sustained exposition of Benjamin's research. By 1937 Benjamin came to envisage the piece as a chapter of his Arcades book project and by 1938 as a component of a stand-alone volume to be titled *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (*Charles Baudelaire. Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus*). This book was never completed, but would have formed the first concretization of over a decade's worth of notes, drafts, and exposés. The two drafts of the Baudelaire essay essentially *are* the "Arcades Project," their conception and execution touching in varying degrees on the full range of its intended themes. This promotion of Baudelaire to Citizen General of the Second Empire could hardly have been anticipated a decade earlier when he was almost nowhere to be encountered in Benjamin's Paris.

In the earliest drafts there is only one passing reference to Baudelaire, that he and Odilon Redon equally deserve "small votive plaques" in the arcades for making "a special world of these buildings" (877). Similarly, in the earliest notes there are the following indications: one passing reference to Baudelaire's endearment for "the fogs of Paris"; one quote from *Artificial Paradises*; and the suggestive annotation, "Baudelaire on allegory (very important!), *Paradis artificiels*, p. 73" (830, 841). By the 1935 exposé, though, Baudelaire is one of six coequal foci

for the investigation, the one in fact providing Benjamin easiest thematic access to his enduring concern with modernity and allegory. And outside the project on the Arcades stands Benjamin's existing relationship with *The Flowers of Evil* (*Les Fleurs du Mal*): he translated their "Parisian Scenes" ("Tableaux parisiens") into German in 1923,¹ providing the occasion for his reflection on "The Task of the Translator" ("Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers"). Indeed Benjamin's eventual deeply ambivalent analysis of the poet's career and thought—alternating scorn with admiration, pity with praise—evidences an overdetermined investment more than merely academic.

"The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" (1938) ("Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire") was Benjamin's submission from his Paris exile to the journal editors, themselves exiled in the United States. Its rejection by Horkheimer and Adorno, communicated in a lengthy epistolary critique by the latter, is an oft-rehearsed episode in Benjamin's legend. In Benjamin's plan, this essay was to form the middle third of the book *Charles Baudelaire*, eventually to be bookended by never-written sections on "Baudelaire as Allegorist" and "The Commodity as a Subject of Poetry."² Adorno's objections to the essay are summarized in his insistence that it is "methodologically inappropriate to give conspicuous individual features from the realm of the superstructure a 'materialist' turn by relating them immediately, and perhaps even causally, to certain corresponding features of the substructure. The materialist

¹ The poems from this section will go on to provide the core of Benjamin's archive for the two Baudelaire essays: by my rough count 31 of Benjamin's 76 total citations of *The Flowers of Evil* are from the "Parisian Scenes" section.

² This information can be found in the "Bibliographical note to the English edition" of the volume in which "The Paris of the Second Empire" appears (7). Clues to the content of these two unfinished sections can be found in the text called "Central Park," a set of 45 hand-written fragments begun in late-mid-1938 as preparation for the Baudelaire book.

determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the *total social process*” (*Corresp.* 283).³

The lack of theoretical mediation between the form and content of singular cultural artifacts and the claims of the overarching social analysis notwithstanding, an editorial rejection would have been no less surprising on stylistic grounds, given that the essay’s three sections, over 90 or so pages, unevenly treat significantly divergent and often abruptly juxtaposed topics ranging from the tax on wine to the Parisian periodical market to the genesis of mystery stories to comparative *flânerie* in London and Berlin to Hugo’s natural supernaturalism to Second Empire men’s fashion to Charles Meryon’s urban imaginary, among others. As with *Origin*, no one would deny the suggestiveness of the associations Benjamin limns, but it is equally hard to deny the idiosyncratic and impressionistic nature of the results. The editors agree to Benjamin’s proposal to revise the central section, and Adorno sends another long letter offering detailed and generous page-by-page commentary, outlining areas for revision and emphasizing the need for greater care in discussing commodification, since “as far as the journal is concerned, [...] a kind of absolute Marxist competence is rightly postulated for every claim that is made” (*Corresp.* 304). Benjamin’s thorough revision is published in 1939 as “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (“Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire”), an essay that entirely surpasses its predecessor in clarity, continuity, and conceptualization. In both drafts, though, Baudelaire comes across in a quite unflattering light.

In “The *Bohème*,” part one of “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” Benjamin claims to find a “resemblance” between the politically inopportune “mystery-mongering of the

³ The primary fault that I would impute to Adorno in this much-discussed exchange (the highlights of which have been long available in English) is an excessively proprietary attitude towards the Arcades project, one allowing his enthusiasm over Benjamin’s terminological consonance with his own work to obscure theoretical dissonance for far too long.

conspirator” Louis-Auguste Blanqui and both “the glaring contradictions” in the development of Baudelaire’s “theoretical writings” and the “enigmatic stuff” of his unlikely allegories (11, 17, 12). The two figures’ proximity within the Parisian *bohème*—where “each person was in a more or less obscure state of revolt against society”—somehow confirms the pair’s shared failure to imagine a politics beyond the futile “metaphysics of the *provocateur*” and in fact plant the “seeds” for a modern fascist propaganda equally flippant about political violence.⁴ That is, in Benjamin’s assessment, “Baudelaire’s political insights do not go fundamentally beyond those of the professional conspirators,” a group excoriated by Marx and Engels (20, 14, 13).⁵

Even as Baudelaire’s theories are dismissed, certain lyrics are approved as empirically sound records of the social and economic life of the Paris of the Second Empire: the “great poem that is entitled ‘Le Vin des chiffonniers’ [‘The Ragpickers’ Wine’]” is not falsely “edifying” in recording the suffering of ragpickers; “Abel and Cain” (“Abel et Cain”) demonstrates “the freer and more reasonable view which Baudelaire had of the disinherited”; “The Venal Muse” (“La Muse vénale”) and “To the Reader” (“Au Lecteur”) show that “Baudelaire knew what the true situation of the man of letters was” (17, 21, 22, 34). Regardless, even if Baudelaire in some essentially journalistic respects rose “above the literary activity surrounding him,” such as

⁴ Benjamin returns to this conjunction on the final page with the silly claim that Baudelaire and Blanqui “are the intertwined hands on a stone under which Napoleon III buried the hopes of the June fighters” (101).

⁵ Marx and Engels write of professional conspirators in a book review in the April 1850 *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*: “It need scarcely be added that these conspirators do not confine themselves to the general organising of the revolutionary proletariat. It is precisely their business to anticipate the process of revolutionary development, to bring it artificially to crisis-point, to launch a revolution on the spur of the moment, without the conditions for a revolution. For them the only condition for revolution is the adequate preparation of their conspiracy. They are the alchemists of the revolution and are characterised by exactly the same chaotic thinking and blinkered obsessions as the alchemists of old. They leap at inventions which are supposed to work revolutionary miracles: incendiary bombs, destructive devices of magic effect, revolts which are expected to be all the more miraculous and astonishing in effect as their basis is less rational.” It is of course unclear how one could transfer this judgment, as Benjamin proposes, to Baudelaire.

Sainte-Beuve's, other aspects of his writing—exemplarily the reflexive non-conformity of a Satanism that “must not be taken too seriously” and a politically muddled and inconstant attitude towards *l'art pour l'art* that signals a “profound duplicity”—betray the weakness of a mind that sustained “not convictions but insinuations” (27, 23, 26).

In the second part, “The *Flâneur*,” the divergent assessments of Baudelaire's verse and criticism persist. On the one hand Baudelaire's distinctive assessment of urban society, as against the “socially dubious” urban taxonomic literature that flourished under Louis Phillipe's reactionary regime, “indicates the early age at which he went his own way.” While the social taxonomies assuage “disquieting notions” aroused by one's fellow urbanites, depicting them as “harmless and of perfect bonhomie,” Baudelaire (because of “[h]is belief in original sin”) recognizes the city as a forest and man as “the most perfect of all beasts of prey” (37, 35, 38, 37, 40, 39). Consequently, lyrics such as “A Martyr” (“Une Martyre”), “The Wine of the Assassin” (“Le Vin de l'assassin”), and “Evening Twilight” (“Le Crépuscule du soir”) share themes, in another strained analogy, with the gritty scientific realism of the detective story, an emergent genre that likewise did not evade “the disquieting and threatening aspects of urban life” (40). These aspects—victims, crime scenes, murderers, masses—appear, though, only as “*disjecta membra*” in Baudelaire, because given the “structure of his instincts,” his “asocial[ity],” and his “cruelty,” correct empirical observations, if one is to accept Benjamin's diagnoses, do not culminate for Baudelaire in proper theoretical detection (43).

Benjamin marshalls Marx's critique of commodity fetishism, in yet another questionable analogy, against Baudelaire's mind. The poet's analytical and affective failings are imputed to the fact that he, as a *flâneur* “abandoned in the crowd[...] shares the situation of the commodity,” namely “intoxication” (55). Benjamin accordingly glosses Baudelaire's notice of

“the big cities’ state of religious intoxication” with: “the commodity is probably the unnamed subject of this state”; likewise, Baudelaire’s thoughts on the “holy prostitution of the soul” turn out to “be nothing else than the prostitution of the commodity-soul” (56). So whereas Engels is “clear” on urban misery, Benjamin claims that Baudelaire is “obscure” when he writes that “[t]he pleasure of being in a crowd is a mysterious expression of the enjoyment of the multiplication of numbers,” unless the realization is made that the statement is “spoken not only from a person’s viewpoint but also from the view-point of a commodity” (58). In sum, the “narcotic” of the crowd left Baudelaire critically unaware of the economic conditions driving his reification and his class’s “decline,” even as “it did not blind him to the horrible social reality,” as seen in his poetry (59).

The final section, “Modernism,” opens with the assertion that “Baudelaire patterned his image of the artist after an image of the hero” (67). For example in the “Salon of 1845,” Baudelaire requires that an artist develop his “[w]ill-power” since a viewer “enjoys the effort and his eye drinks the sweat” and in the *Advice for Young Writers (Conseils aux jeunes littérateurs)* he comments on “how much work it takes ‘to let a work of art emerge from a daydream’” (67). Similarly, heroic toil is valorized in figurations such as Constantin Guys’ painterly “stabs” and the poet of “The Sun”’s (“Le Soleil”) “*fantasque escrime*” (68; fantastical fencing). Benjamin offers the faint praise that this self-glorification “makes a virtue out of necessity,” given Baudelaire’s penury and his lack of the intellectual “reserves which great knowledge and a comprehensive view of history give a person” (70, 71). But for Benjamin, Baudelaire’s heroic self-fashioning does not actually ameliorate either “the shocks which his worries caused him” or the “abrupt, shock-like change” to which “all his stirrings” in the city were “subject” (70, 94). Piteously, the supposedly heroic “feints of his prosody” are only a “continuous series of tiny

improvisations” defending a mind overtaxed and struggling with “a lack of conviction, insight, and steadiness” (70, 94).⁶ Marx is again invoked, here to demystify this “superstition about creativeness” (that is, artistic labor, which merely “guards the interest of a social order”) and to suggest bizarrely that Baudelaire’s urban heroism is, like Napoleon III’s *remplaçant* army, rooted with “the swamp flower of the peasant *lumpenproletariat*” (71, 72).

As before, certain lyrics redeem for these supposed intellectual failings by the correctness of their empirical disclosures: “The Little Old Women” (“Les Petites vieilles”) does not conceal the “threadbare quality” of Second Empire heroism; “The Soul of Wine” (“L’Ame du vin”) recognizes “the fencing slave in the proletarian”; “The Ragpickers’ Wine” provides an “extended metaphor for the procedure of the poet” as refuse collector (73, 74, 79). But when Baudelaire dares to imagine, as in the essay “The Painter of Modern Life” (“Le peintre de la vie moderne”), that the “constant, unchangeable” forms of classical art are adaptable to modern fashion, morality, and passions or, as in the “Salon of 1846,” that modern art can glorify the heroism of “criminals and kept women” above that in the *Iliad*, then Benjamin avows quite censoriously that “[o]ne cannot say that this is a profound analysis” (81, 78, 82). Baudelaire’s aesthetics’ failure to recognize that “[the modern hero] is predestined for doom,” that modernity carries “the mark of Cain on its brow,” means the “theory of modern art is the weakest point” of Baudelaire’s writings (81, 78). Benjamin insists that Baudelaire’s aesthetic theory does “not cope with” modernity’s “loss of nature and naiveté” and it does not provide the genuine “interpenetration with classical antiquity” given “in certain poems of the *Fleurs du mal*,” poems whose “permanence” is grounded in the “idea of the decrepitude of the big city” (82, 83).

⁶ Indeed, Benjamin’s “radical” assessment is, in all particulars, indistinguishable from Henry James’s undeniably conventional one: “Baudelaire had a certain groping sense of the moral complexities of life, and if the best that he succeeds in doing is to drag them down into the very turbid element in which he himself plashes and flounders, and there present them to us much besmirched and bespattered, this was not a want of goodwill in him, but rather a dullness and permanent immaturity of vision” (280).

Since, as always for Benjamin, modernity is a fallen state, its true chronicle must record nothing other than decrepitude, as with the “sobbing of an awakening person” in “Morning Twilight” (“Le Crépuscule du matin”) or “The Sun”’s display of “the city threadbare” (75, 83). And since, as always for Benjamin, the surest sign of temporal decrepitude is pure referential language’s dislocations into arbitrary allegories, it is no surprise that these are used to convey the “fragility” and “sadness” of Paris in “The Swan” and the modern hero’s abandonment to “everlasting idleness” in “The Invitation to the Voyage” (“L’Invitation au voyage”). Indeed, Benjamin claims in cryptically martial rhetoric that allegories are “let in on the secret” of Baudelaire’s poetic “*coup de main*” and that they are part of Baudelaire’s “technique of the *putsch*” (100, 82, 96). Otherwise, Baudelaire’s vision of modernism is already “obsolete,” his idea of “the modern hero is no hero” at all, and “[h]eroic modernism turns out to be a tragedy” (90, 97). Ultimately, Baudelaire’s lyrics are praised for mimetically capturing, almost despite themselves and certainly despite Baudelaire, the decrepitude with which Benjamin’s philosophy had always arraigned the modern world, whereas Baudelaire’s critical insights are denigrated for attempting to transmogrify that sense of decrepitude into something productive.

The revised essay, “On Some Motifs In Baudelaire,” retains the basic argument of the earlier essay, but narrows and somewhat alters its archive, while considerably improving the presentation. Unlike its predecessor, this essay sustains and develops a single critical claim against Baudelaire, working sequentially through relevant theoretical, literary, and historical backgrounds, without extended digressions, re-assembling these materials in its concluding moments into a clear indictment. Among the excisions, immediately noticeable is the absence of any reference to commodity fetishism. The first essay cites Marx in the first sentence; the second cites Marx in substance only once, and then only for his thoughts on the industrial division of

labor: in passing, Benjamin suggests that Marx's concept will both "shed a peculiar light" on Poe's fictional crowd, whose "behavior is a reaction to shocks," and also on the "the game of chance" conceived as the "mirror" of industrial labor (175, 176, 177). This elision of Marx, no doubt to satisfy Adorno's qualms, is largely terminological given the survival of the associated argument, never Marx's anyway, under the aegis of "aura," whose definition continues to ape Marx's idiom: "Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man" (188). Here I want to discuss two more substantive revisions, ones which make unmistakable the link between the analytical procedures employed on the German mourning plays and on the Paris arcades.

First, the revision states early and axiomatically what was only implied late in the first essay: shock-ridden modern experience (now categorized as *Erlebnis*) is a degraded fall from premodern experience (categorized as *Erfahrung*). In the three opening sections, Benjamin marshals contemporaneous representations of memory and consciousness to evidence his belief that Baudelaire's success relied on a fairly recent "change in the structure of [his readers'] experience" (156). Thus, Henri Bergson is found to be correct to suggest "the structure of memory as decisive for the philosophical pattern of experience," but dismissed because he does not recognize that the "historical determination" of "the nature of experience in the *durée*" he describes is merely the historically particular correlate of "the inhospitable, blinding age of big-scale industrialism," that "[i]t is the quintessence of a passing moment [*Erlebnis*] that struts about in the borrowed garb of experience" (157, 185).⁷ Similarly, Proust's fiction precisely captures contemporary attempts "to produce experience synthetically" as "there is less and less

⁷ Already in the first Baudelaire essay there is a possible hint of Bergson's influence when Benjamin refers to "the natural productive élan of a person" ("Paris" 75).

hope that it will come into being naturally,” his experience of *mémoire involontaire* providing also “an immanent critique of Bergson”’s voluntaristic view of memorial recall (157). But Proust himself is relegated because he fails to historicize his valorization of *mémoire involontaire*, since “[i]t is by no means inevitable to be dependent on chance in this matter”—for example, “the storyteller” of old was not so constrained—and the deprecation of *mémoire volontaire* obtains only in an industrial capitalist world like ours where man “is increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world around him by way of experience” (158).

Having imperiously disposed of Bergson and Proust for failing to recognize that what they consider universal features of human consciousness are actually the cognitive limitations specific to the modern world, Benjamin proceeds to a slightly more sympathetic account of a third influential, contemporary theory of experience, that found in Freud’s “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” Benjamin analogizes the cognitive alteration triggered by urban-industrial shocks to the development of Freud’s fabular living vesicle, whose external sensorium of necessity becomes a “protective shield [...] against the effects of the excessive energies at work in the external world,” like the “shocks and collisions” of urban crowds (161, 175).⁸ The deflection of and defense against external sensations disallows the recording of experiences and sensations in the experiential registers of the unconscious, leaving modern urban man a creature bound to merely conscious engagements.⁹ Baudelaire can thus, in his few redeemed lyrics, go no deeper

⁸ Benjamin acknowledges the freeness of his borrowing: “we shall have to content ourselves with investigating the fruitfulness of this hypothesis in situations far removed from those which Freud had in mind when he wrote” (160). One difficulty in extrapolating from a long-term speculative phylogenesis like Freud’s in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” to a short-term historical development (industrialization) is the questionable assertion that modern urbanites—whom Freud would consider “highly developed organisms [in whom] the receptive cortical layer of the former vesicle has long been withdrawn into the depths of the interior of the body”—are somehow subject to a level of sensory excitation quantitatively greater *and* are granted less “preparedness for anxiety” than any previous population (299, 303).

⁹ A classic statement of these “modern” concerns can be found in Georg Simmel’s essay “Metropolis and Mental Life” in its claim of how the city is the site for the conflict between a sense of self derived

than reflecting on and recording the “sudden start[s]” and “sensation[s] of fright” parried by the superficialities of consciousness (163). Benjamin’s Baudelaire is, however, denied access to any greater psychic depth due to the cognitive limitations imposed on modern man’s experience. How Benjamin has escaped these constraints is, of course, an open question.

And for the second major revision, Benjamin aligns Baudelaire’s concepts of spleen and ideal with *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, respectively. Benjamin returns to Bergson’s claim that the *durée* “rids man’s soul of obsession with time” and to Proust’s quest “to bring to light past things saturated with [...] reminiscences” and maintains that an identical nostalgia for pre-modern wholeness operates in Baudelaire’s search for correspondences, which would somehow reveal the “data of prehistory” (180, 182). These correspondences attempt futilely to recapture “a concept of experience which includes ritual elements” in order “to fathom the full meaning of the breakdown which he, a modern man, was witnessing” (181). This search for “something irretrievably lost”—for a once-possible “experience [...] in crisis-proof form [...] possible only within the realm of the ritual”—becomes for Benjamin the true “secret architecture” of *The Flowers of Evil* (181, 182).¹⁰ Correspondingly, the experience of modernity’s fallen temporality, the “collapse” of experience, is made to be the secret to Baudelaire’s spleen, a condition in which the poet “musters the multitude of the seconds against” remembrance (184, 183).

The preponderance of spleen in modernity gives “a sense of measureless desolation to Baudelaire’s verse,” which contains mere “scattered fragments of genuine historical experience”

from participation in the “general human quality” and a problematic “individuality” driven by participation in a divided labor force.

¹⁰ I will discuss Benjamin’s interpretative habits below, but note for now how this view of “Correspondences” is unresponsive to the poem’s manifest anxiety over an experiential unity (“*unité*”) qualified as dark (“*ténébreuse*”) and said to be confounded partially of confused words (“*confuses paroles*”) and corrupt scents (“*parfums [...] corrompus*”) (“*Motifs*” 181, 182). There is no unproblematic *Erfahrung* to be found in Baudelaire’s forest.

as exemplified by the lost scent of Spring and engulfing time in “The Taste for Nothingness (“Le Goût de néant”), the howling homeless clocks of the fourth “Spleen,” and the nostalgia of “The Past Life” (“La Vie antérieure”) (184, 185). Indeed, Benjamin claims that this thrall to temporality, spleen’s exposure of “the passing moment in all its nakedness,” is rendered by Baudelaire in a manner identical to that employed by the mourning-play dramatists to represent the sense of loss: Baudelaire, like the Baroque dramatists, shows how, “[t]o his horror, the melancholy man sees the earth revert to a mere state of nature. No breath of prehistory surrounds it: there is no aura” (185). Aura, the mnemonic associations supposedly encoded manually in an object through laborious craft, is absent from Baudelaire’s lyrics, because of the shocks impeding his remembrance.¹¹ Thus, for Benjamin, the *idéal* Baudelaire strove for was nothing other than Benjaminian *Erfahrung*; the *spleen* which impeded his progress was identical to Benjaminian melancholy.

Now, it is undeniable that modern life is bound to appear tawdry, barren, and bereft and its aesthetic glorification a desperate rationalization if one sustains a metaphysical fantasy of a once and hopefully future socially and linguistically unmediated *Erfahrung*. This is something Baudelaire already knew. In “The Painter of Modern Life,” he famously notes—proleptically vis-à-vis Benjamin—that “it is much easier to decide outright that everything about the garb of an age is absolutely ugly than to devote oneself to the task of distilling from it the mysterious element of beauty that it may contain” (*Painter* 13).¹² But Benjamin’s unwillingness to engage

¹¹ I defer for now from accounting for Benjamin’s many, often inconsistent, elucidations of “aura,” other than to say that if one source for aura is the manual labor invested in a handicraft object then we should agree to see Baudelaire’s lyrics—the result of a very refined technique—as auratic in the highest degree.

¹² Photographer Diane Arbus movingly echoes Baudelaire’s quintessentially modern outlook when she proposes, in her “Plan for a Photographic Project,” “to photograph the considerable ceremonies of our present because we tend while living here and now to perceive only what is random and barren and

Baudelaire's (or Bergson's, Proust's, or Freud's) counter-theories, or to recognize any imaginative artifice in *The Flowers of Evil*, renders the textual specificity of Baudelaire's oeuvre essentially inconsequential to the theoretical claims of the "Arcades." Nothing actually claimed by Baudelaire has any power to perturb Benjamin's notions. I have attempted so far to make unambiguous the many methodological, historiographical, and metaphysical assumptions and principles—most crucially the belief in inexorable historical decline and the theologically-rooted deprecation of modernity—underlying Benjamin's unhappy encounter with Baudelaire's aesthetic. It is clear that Baudelaire merely provides a ready nineteenth-century hook on which to extend the storyline that Benjamin had started telling in the seventeenth century. In the next section, I will focus on Benjamin's engagements with particular poems to demonstrate the extent of his instrumentalization of Baudelaire.

Benjamin as a Literary Critic

Whatever claims may be made for Benjamin as a philosopher, mystic, correspondent, revolutionary, martyr, memoirist, or stylist, I here chiefly argue for his insufficiency as a careful reader of Baudelaire. Benjamin's literary-critical methodology does not fully apprehend the fantastical rhetoricity of Baudelaire's language and disregards the cognitive-aesthetic practice of *The Flowers of Evil*.¹³ In Benjamin we find a critic who selectively dismembers and sutures

formless about it, while we regret that the present is not like the past and despair of its ever becoming the future, its innumerable inscrutable habits lie in wait for their meaning."

¹³ In Benjamin's Baudelaire essays, there are only two abortive attempts at what we might recognize as rhetorical reading: 1) Benjamin paraphrases, alongside less focused comments by Lemaître and Laforgue, André Gide's notice of "a very calculated disharmony between the image and the object" and Rivière's emphasis on "how Baudelaire proceeds from the remote word, how he reaches it to tread softly as he cautiously brings it closer to the object," footnoting four apparently relevant examples, but without comment. In quick succession, Benjamin then notes Baudelaire's use of common words and then his use of personification, again without interpretative comment, ultimately allowing these openings into Baudelaire's rhetorical strategies to be sealed with the already-cited absurd claim that Baudelaire's

(often with little more than biographical gossip or historical anecdote) whatever elements of Baudelaire's works will support his overarching messianic ideology. He anticipates that his constellations will form an arresting truth, but we can choose to be wary of the monster that arises: a pathetic Baudelaire who suffered and recognized others' suffering under capitalist markets and industry (or so Benjamin would ask us to construe the raw information impressed in the poet's lyrics) but was too shock-beset to analyze or ameliorate his historical situation (or so Benjamin would ask us to construe the poet's critical writings). Benjamin's Baudelaire is a historical cipher, an unwitting precipitate of his historical context. To say next that all it takes to reveal this is a careful reading of both authors, however, is to point to a not incidental hurdle, given the nature of much of the critical literature on Benjamin, a point that I addressed at the end of the previous chapter. First I will elucidate Benjamin's methodology in greater detail.

Almost all of the roughly 46 poems and three prose poems cited across the two essays are treated as self-evident support for the always at least arguable historical or theoretical claim at hand. Only three poems, "The Ragpickers' Wine," "The Swan," and "To a Woman Passerby" (the former two cited only in the first essay) are analyzed in a non-cursory manner. A few are not quoted at all, a few are not even identified by title, and almost all are considered as interchangeably sincere confessions directly attributable to the historical poet.¹⁴ A typical engagement treats a given poem as a realist account of mid-century Parisian life, according it a sociological and biographical literality parried from the outset by the histrionic title Baudelaire

"technique is the technique of the *putsch*" ("Paris" 98-100). 2) In the revision, he goes over the same ground, here referring to "collapsing words," yet with no greater scrutiny ("Motifs" 164-165).

¹⁴ Beryl Schlossman, in "Benjamin's *Über Einige Motive bei Baudelaire*: The Secret Architecture of *Correspondances*," displays a true Benjaminian's delicacy on Benjamin's lack of quotations and citations: "Baudelaire's texts *go underground* in ["On Some Motifs in Baudelaire"], where Benjamin's quotations recall the minimum that is necessary to reveal the outlines of motif as secret architecture" (569 my emphasis).

awarded the collection. In this reductively historicist vein, Benjamin proffers, for example, that the lyric “Abel and Cain” is actually about the proletariat, that Satan in “The Litanies of Satan” is actually Louis Auguste Blanqui, that “The Denial of Saint Peter” actually mourns the culpably precipitous dream of a dictatorship of the proletariat in June 1848, and that the acquiescence to a bruised heart in “The Love of Lies” actually marks, quite astonishingly, the petty bourgeoisie’s declining purchasing power (“Paris” 22, 23, 101, 59). Much of this is arguable and appealing, offering surprisingly canny juxtapositions of text and context,¹⁵ but very little of it is other than asserted and none of it affords a serious rhetorical, philosophical, or psychological competence to Baudelaire. We are not considering, it is worth emphasizing, *Les Fleurs des Hochkapitalismus*, nor a private journal of impressions on society and politics.

Svend Erik Larsen in his essay “Benjamin: A Literary Critic?” has brought uncommon clarity to Benjamin’s incapacity for engaging literature. Larsen notes how Benjamin’s essentially Platonic conception of representation—one spelled out explicitly in the mourning-play book—leads him to treat literary texts, despite “his keen eye for surprising parallels or associative links,” as mere epiphenomena: for Benjamin “literature comes to assume the role of an illustrative text, or of a cultural-historical source for an analytical thesis on the fragmented character of the city. [...] Thus, we can pass back and forth between the literary structure and the world of actual experience without noticing any decisive boundary” (149, 136-137). This conception of literature has two major implications for Benjamin’s analyses. First, literature’s textual specificity is erased as the “transformation from individual work into a prototypical social object is grasped without consideration of all the textual details that distinguish the work both as literature, as an individual work, and as a commodity, and which gives the various literary forms

¹⁵ As I noted of his work on the German baroque dramas, there are undeniably some signs, in the questions posed and associations posited by Benjamin, of a kind of proto-cultural studies here.

(genres, imagery, motif, and so forth) a relatively independent historicity” (139). Second, texts that do not accord with the thematic demands of Benjamin’s project are ignored, as “works or literary forms that take as their theme anything other than the gestural instant on which Benjamin focuses, or that don’t directly treat the city at all, although this hardly prevents them from appearing and circulating in the urban culture—these works are marginalized in Benjamin’s oeuvre” (140). Benjamin’s readings of Baudelaire lyrics clearly exemplify the general habits that Larsen diagnoses.

The most cited poem in both versions of the essay (four and three times, respectively), “Evening Twilight,” is adduced by Benjamin to prove the incontrovertible: that Baudelaire was aware of “the masses,” “registered” the practice of prostitution, and expressed “ambivalence” about “crowds” (“Paris” 43, 57; “Motifs” 172). Being a theorist of allegory, Benjamin surprisingly omits the fact that that practice is registered as a personification (“La Prostitution”), a figure whose undertakings are elaborated via a jarring sequence of similes.¹⁶ First, the nightly commencement of Prostitution’s trade is compared to an ant army’s egress from its hill (“Comme une fourmilière”). The army is then humanly re-figured as Prostitution’s efforts are compared to an enemy combatant preparing a surprise attack (“Ainsi que l’ennemi”). Finally, Prostitution is analogized to a worm that steals Man’s food (“Comme un ver”). An accounting for these three similes would not begin to exhaust the figurative grammar of the seven lines devoted to “La Prostitution.”¹⁷ And being a theorist of the city, Benjamin surprisingly leaves unnoted that Prostitution’s nightly advent is figured as an illumination facilitated, seemingly, by

¹⁶ But then Jim Hansen reminds us in “Formalism and Its Malcontents: Benjamin and de Man on the Function of Allegory” that in Benjamin’s usage, as we saw in the mourning-play book, “allegory” is a trivial catch-all for the language of fallen man, that “allegory’s failure actively underscores the gulf between matter and transcendence by foregrounding the conflict between artistic form and transcendent or theological intention” (671).

¹⁷ Lyrics in French are from Baudelaire’s *Œuvres complètes*.

gaslight (“À travers les lueurs”); that its journey, far from corresponding to the street map, clears away new occult paths (“elle se fraye un occulte chemin”); that all these movements and transformations, far from effecting urban degradation, transpire at the heart of a city already a mire (“au sein de la cité de fange”). Instead, Benjamin’s only comment on this figurative complexity is that “[o]nly the mass of inhabitants permits prostitution to spread over large parts of the city. And only the mass makes it possible for the sexual object to become intoxicated with the hundred stimuli which it produces” (“Paris” 57). It is not at all clear how this relates to Baudelaire’s lyric.

Compare this with Jonathan Culler’s observations in “‘Feminism in Time’: A Response.” Culler, too, hones in on the occurrence of allegory. For Benjamin (when considering “The Swan,” for example) simply noting Baudelaire’s resort to allegory is *prima facie* evidence for his thesis on the poet, the specific content being immaterial. Culler’s attunement to rhetoric leads him to consider allegory’s possible functions less narrowly. He notes how “the ideology of a culture may be most powerfully instantiated in its production of allegorical agents,” and thus takes the unlikely personification—“the movement of eerie abstraction”—of “La Prostitution” as a Baudelairean provocation, not merely a Baudelairean report (188). Culler seeks to understand the force of this provocation, which extends into other poems in *Les Fleurs du mal*, not in terms of a meta-history or meta-theory, but rather within the historically-specific “discursive processes in which these poems, with their unusual thematic nexus of eroticism, virginity, and barrenness, participate” (192). His analysis of discursive contexts lights the way to a more seriously historically materialist account of “Evening Twilight”: Culler argues that “[Baudelaire] counters both the religion of the virginal mother and the reglementarian practices devoted to making the prostitute a public health functionary, but in keeping the two most implausible qualities of the

central figures in these discourses—the virginity of the mother and the barrenness of the prostitute—he retains a transformative reference to them, redirecting them toward a different result” (193).¹⁸ Beyond its rhetorical sophistication, what is so marked about such a reading is that it grants Baudelaire an aesthetic competence that Benjamin denies the poet at every turn: Culler emphasizes how in Baudelaire’s “transformative” use of allegory “lies a good part of his ‘modernity’” (191). Unlike for Benjamin, this modernity is not prejudged pejoratively.

When context does enter the picture for Benjamin, it is generally in the way that Adorno diagnosed: Benjamin gives “conspicuous individual features from the realm of the superstructure a ‘materialist’ turn by relating them immediately, and perhaps even causally, to certain corresponding features of the substructure” (*Corresp.* 283). For example, Benjamin’s discussion of “The Ragpickers’ Wine” proceeds via a brief social history of the mid-century, since “[a]t that time motifs which appear in this poem were being publicly discussed” (“Paris” 17). Benjamin covers “the tax on wine,” sourcing Karl Marx’s *The Class Struggle in France 1848-1850*, the account of a police “section head,” and also that of another “contemporary observer” (“Paris” 17-18). He appends eight lines of the poem to this lesson with the perfunctory transition, “*Thus* in ‘The Ragpickers’ Wine’” (my emphasis). The text of these eight lines is left unexamined in favor of providing further citations on the sociology of the ragpicker (who “fascinated his epoch”) bolstered by additional contemporary accounts, including one that “gives the budget of a Paris ragpicker and his family for the period between 1849 and 1850, presumably the time when Baudelaire’s poem was written” (19-20). This “presumably,” another precipitous appeal to the economic base, fails to distinguish the historical stereotype from the literary figure, presumably

¹⁸ Culler analyzes “Correspondances” in a similar manner in the essay “Intertextuality and Interpretation: Baudelaire’s ‘Correspondances’” as “an assimilation and transformation of other texts and its meaning a function of its relation to other texts” (119).

making of a culture's discursive agon an unwarranted unity and making of Baudelaire's idiosyncratic deployment of discursive orthodoxies a mere symptomology.¹⁹ Marx, et al., explain Baudelaire; Baudelaire exemplifies the observations of Marx, et al. Thus, while Benjamin recognizes the ragpicker as a popular figure for those "in a more or less obscure state of revolt against society," he does not consider how Baudelaire's specific deployment of the ragpicker complicates such popular figurations (20).

Again, compare this with Baudelaire scholars who carefully chart political and cultural contexts for "The Ragpickers' Wine," especially given its multiple drafts composed during two decades spanning the rise and fall of the Second Republic.²⁰ Building on work by W.T. Bandy and Luc Badesco, Richard D. E. Burton in *Baudelaire and the Second Empire* gives a detailed overview of contexts for Baudelaire's revisions.²¹ Burton argues that "[r]eaders alert to the political codes and contexts of mid-nineteenth-century France will not fail to notice how almost all the changes Baudelaire made [...] make of this 'definitive' version of 'Le Vin des chiffonniers' one of the richest, most complex and most ambiguous political poems in

¹⁹ Michael W. Jennings is unperturbed: "Benjamin resolutely refuses to attribute a single productive social or political insight to Baudelaire himself; the achievement of Benjamin's essays is their ability to expose *Les Fleurs du mal* as uniquely, scathingly, terrifyingly *symptomatic* of Baudelaire's era—and ours" (Introduction 2, his emphasis).

²⁰ Claude Pichois, in his edition of Baudelaire's *Œuvres complètes*, notes that "The Ragpickers' Wine" is "le poème dont les versions sont les plus nombreuses" (1047; the poem where the versions are most numerous). Benjamin does note, in a footnote, changes to the poem's ending ("Paris" 19-21).

²¹ Bandy in "Le Chiffonnier de Baudelaire" distinguishes Baudelaire's ragpicker from the protagonist of a popular 1847 play, *The Ragpicker of Paris*, noting that despite numerous descriptive similarities, "dans le *Vin des Chiffonniers*, ce n'est pas le décor qui importe, c'est la vision hallucinatoire du vieillard, c'est l'antithèse entre la misère de son état et la noblesse de ses rêves" (583; in "The Ragpickers' Wine," it is not the setting that matters, but rather the hallucinations of the old man, the antithesis between the misery of his condition and the nobility of his dreams). Badesco in "Baudelaire et la revue 'Jean Raisin'" alike draws attention to the imaginative transformations that Baudelaire's ragpicker undergoes in successive drafts, suggesting that the "réalisme de Baudelaire, si 'réalisme il y a', a ce souci d'élevation, de transcendance et de mystère" (83; realism of Baudelaire, if realism it be, has this concern for elevation, for transcendence and for mystery). See also Abraham Avni's "A Revaluation of Baudelaire's 'Le Vin': Its Originality and Significance for *Les Fleurs du mal*," where he argues that "Baudelaire's wine poems transcend the confines of tradition" (317).

Baudelaire's entire work" (242). What emerges in Burton's reading is a poem that deploys the convoluted representational history of "the ragpicker" (the socialist's mascot, the bourgeois's bogeyman, the Marxist's scapegoat) to offer a cogent reflection on the failure of the Second Republic: "Baudelaire's point seems to be that the (cynical) authoritarianism of Bonapartism is already contained *in nuce* in the (idealistic and Utopian) authoritarianism of republican-socialist attempts to legislate for instant human happiness and to shape human beings in accordance with some pre-existing ideological blueprint" (257). This reading takes the poem not as Benjamin would, as some kind of positivist ethnography, but rather as a considered engagement with a range of popular discourses.

Building on Burton, Ross Chambers in "Recycling the Ragpicker" recognizes under the poem's historically-specific terms a compelling general philosophy of history:

The vacillations and torment of those who, in reality, *undergo* the effects of history—they are 'tourmentés par l'âge' ('âge' in the sense, not only of old age, but also of the era, the epoch) like a lamp tormented by the wind—are contrasted with the illusory benefits associated with an active *making* of (narrative) history. But these very illusions are simultaneously presented as compensatory indulgences or necessary self-deceptions on the part of those whose actual fate it is to be, not the *producers* of history, but its ragpickers, those who stagger along, buffeted by events and picking up the débris that history 'throws up' like a 'vomissement' but attempting also to recycle the bits and pieces into a form that might make sense of their experience. (189-190)

Essentially, Chambers highlights Baudelaire's penetrating vision of politics and poetics as necessarily provisional engagements with inexorable contingencies, notions that will reappear

prominently in the reading of “The Swan” at the end of this chapter. Chambers recognizes, like Culler, Baudelaire’s modernity as something other than a fall.

Benjamin, however, is quite insensible to such secular meaning-making. This tendency is particularly apparent in his closest analysis in either essay, of the sonnet “To a Woman Passerby.” Benjamin finds Baudelaire celebrating the urban crowd out of which a beautiful woman momentarily appears as a catalyst for unexpected passions, as it is “the refuge [...] of love which eludes the poet” but also the fount of “the apparition which fascinates him” and thus allows “the poet’s passion” to “burst[] out of him like a flame” (“Paris” 45). Quite exceptionally, form momentarily enters the analysis in comments on the “problematical” and “profound gulf between the quatrains which present the occurrence and the tercets which transfigure it” (46). But the formal insight serves only to disabuse “the poet” of his erotic delusion, since “[w]hat makes his body contract in a tremor [...] is not the rapture of a man whose every fiber is suffused with *eros*” but rather “the kind of sexual shock that can beset a lonely man.” The poem, despite itself, is forced by Benjamin to “reveal the stigmata which life in a metropolis inflicts upon love” (“Motifs” 169).²² Since Benjamin insists “that *sexus* in Baudelaire detached itself from *eros*[...] that love which is sated with the experience of the aura” and thus inaccessible in atomized modernity, Baudelaire’s experience must of necessity be degraded (189). The implication is that in the lost time of *Erfahrung*, love was easy.

²² Baudelaire’s and Benjamin’s divergent perspectives on the city can be seen in their comments on Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd,” a fortuitous touchstone critically marked by them both. Benjamin spots enervation due to the revelation of “hopeless isolation” and “dehumanized” “goings-on,” yet Baudelaire is invigorated due to the expression of a “[c]uriosity” that “had become a fatal, irresistible passion!” (“Paris” 53; *Painter* 7). The difference in response is not to be found in the words of Poe’s story, but rather in irreconcilable attitudes towards the contingency of historical unfolding and the intercession of linguistic and social mediation, over whether these are modern afflictions magnified in industrial urban culture or transhistorical existential specifications.

As before, any possibility of Baudelaire's poem having productive insight (or an active relation to the lyric tradition or conscious staging of a non-autobiographical or non-exclusive psychic posture) is slighted. Benjamin nullifies the poem's primary apprehension: again, the inexorable sovereignty of contingency in human affairs, amplified among other ways in the poem by the pluperfect subjunctive of "you whom I would have loved" ("toi que j'eusse aimée"), the tense and mood of unconsummated opportunity.²³ The sonnet, in fact, does not represent the passing erotic spark as a stigmata, but as a bittersweet pleasure of the city, even a rebirth ("renaître"). Benjamin's historical vision cannot abide a vindication of modern life; Baudelaire's reverie is thus cast as a lonely man's delusion. Here and throughout, Benjamin offers a literary criticism whose messianism leaves it insusceptible to Baudelaire's poetics of contingency and whose spasmodic materialism often leaves it insusceptible to the complex material of the psyche. These tendencies are also apparent in Benjamin's discussion of the erotic lyric "Damned Women (Delphine and Hippolyte)" ("Femmes Damnées [Delphine et Hippolyte]"). The poem's unarguable "confusion" is edifyingly evaded by Benjamin in a detour away from the path to eternal hell ("le chemin de l'enfer éternel") that Baudelaire limns. Benjamin moves instead in the direction of "factories" (unmentioned in the poem) whose "disfiguring" work, along with "the political struggle," provides the basal "'realistic' element" driving the advent of "masculine traits" in women, a circumstance improperly accorded by Baudelaire the "purely sexual accent" of heroic lesbianism in his superstructural "framework of modernism" ("Paris" 93, 94). That is,

²³ In quite another context Wai Chee Dimock notes appositely that the pluperfect subjunctive "turn[s] the known world into a wavering shadow, a fading in and out of what might have been and what might still be" (2).

Benjamin takes a complex, and undeniably problematic, meditation on lesbian desire as, inexplicably, a journalistic exposé on the masculinization of women in factories.²⁴

There remains the common retort that Benjamin was not trying to offer close literary readings but rather something else: a theory, a philosophy, a tool for the revolution. Irving Wohlfarth, for example, in a footnote where he acknowledges that Benjamin actually got Baudelaire wrong offers a typical version of this defense: “Benjamin does not mention certain obvious ironies in [“The Ragpickers’ Wine”] which would surely complicate his reading of it if he were not proposing to ‘use’ the poem rather than ‘interpret’ it” (149). Beyond the worry over a theory or tool so carelessly built, the conditions of this “use” are what should rankle. In all he says, Benjamin highlights Baudelaire’s prodigious aesthetic labor in making sense of a modern world in the absence of visible or reassuring metahistory and metaphysics. But for him to characterize Baudelaire’s claims for that labor, manifested among other ways by a commitment to form and technique, as less “a great achievement of the will” and more an indication of “a lack of conviction, insight, and steadiness” is, to say the very least, to misunderstand Baudelaire’s accomplishment (“Paris” 94). Burton’s rather more considered and generous assessment presents a much more recognizable figure:

In attempting to explain these shifts and switches of meaning, it will not greatly avail us to fall back on the proverbial waywardness of Baudelaire’s convictions, that alleged love of contradiction for contradiction’s sake that has so often functioned as an all-purpose stand-by solution to any intractable problem arising from the poet’s work. Baudelaire’s mind proceeds by contradiction but wayward or whimsical it is not, and if it often seems

²⁴ That so much of Benjamin’s misprision of Baudelaire’s texts circulates around representations of sexuality is surely not incidental. Benjamin’s historical nostalgia has its correlate in a psychological nostalgia as well.

capable of espousing antithetical positions virtually simultaneously or of oscillating perpetually between affirmation and negation, it is not, as some would have it, through sheer capricious perversity but as part of a tortuous life-long quest for synthesis and totality. (260)²⁵

This process of seeking an adequately total perspective on the contingent and antagonistic material of human culture is vividly illustrated in “The Swan.”

Baudelaire against Benjamin

In “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” Benjamin claims that “‘Le Cygne’ is paramount” among those “certain poems of the *Fleurs du mal*” that “presented modernism in its interpenetration with classical antiquity.” Whereas “the aesthetic reflections in the theory of art,” most prominently “The Painter of Modern Life,” wrongly promise modernity’s potential coequivalence with antique cultural achievement, “The Swan” correctly shows for Benjamin that, in fact, “decrepitude constitutes the closest connection between modernism and antiquity.” This claim for the poem’s orientation is grounded entirely in this compact paraphrase: “The stature of Paris is fragile; it is surrounded by symbols of fragility—living creatures (the negress and the swan) and historical figures (Andromache, ‘widow of Hector and wife of Helenus’). Their common feature is sadness about what was and lack of hope for what is to come” (“Paris” 82). Now, while sadness undoubtedly figures prominently in the poem, Benjamin’s further

²⁵ A search “for synthesis and totality,” as Jameson notes above, defines Benjamin’s work as well. It would be worth speculating on how much of Benjamin’s animus towards Baudelaire is fueled by disidentification. T.J. Clark notes the strong transference: “The verdict on Baudelaire as secret agent in the enemy camp [...] is a verdict, hard won, on himself” (“Should” 44). A pastiche of citations from the Baudelaire essays could be mistaken as autobiography: “He usually presents his views apodictically. Discussion is not his style”; “what impelled Baudelaire to give a radical-theological form to his radical rejection of those in power[?]”; “To his end Baudelaire remained in a bad position on the literary market”; “Baudelaire owned few of the material conditions of intellectual labour. From a library to an apartment there was nothing that he did not have to do without in the course of his life” (“Paris” 12, 24, 34, 72).

inference of fragility, decrepitude, and hopelessness is wholly unsupported by the poem, albeit necessary for his theory of history. This theory is made particularly apparent in the ninth aphorism in “On the Concept of History,” a text that provides a telling counterpoint to “The Swan.”

Like in “The Swan,” which is inaugurated with an apostrophe to the Andromache of the *Aeneid*, in the aphorism a narrator’s thoughts are set in motion by reflection on a real, existent artwork apprehended by the aphorist and available to his reader. Paul Klee’s watercolor *Angelus Novus* is the inspiration for Benjamin’s aphorist,²⁶ who first conjures this work (“Es gibt”) into an imaginative space and then concretizes the image with perceived details (“darauf dargestellt”) of the represented angel’s expression and bearing (*Gesammelte* I.2 697-698). But here the aphorist interposes a quasi-apodictic claim that this image is identical in appearance to (“muß so aussehen”) the angel of history. His first succeeding claim, that the angel’s face is oriented to the past (“Er hat das Antlitz der Vergangenheit zugewendet”), seems intended equally for Klee’s and Benjamin’s imagined angel, but it does not correspond to the watercolor in which the angel is seemingly looking off to the viewer’s right. For a reader invested in Benjamin’s metaphysics, the misreading of the Klee painting would be inconsequential to the aphorism’s truth-content, a truth-content not susceptible (as all metaphysics are not) to empirical disconfirmation. Benjamin is not interpreting Klee; he is “using” him. Thus, I will primarily concern myself with elucidating the logical structure and aporias of Benjamin’s historical theory in order to contrast it with Baudelaire’s. Klee’s distracted angel is merely an occasion, then, for Benjamin to send his own

²⁶ Beatrice Hanssen suggests in “Portrait of Melancholy (Benjamin, Warburg, Panofsky)” that “behind the Klee picture hides another image, the image of another winged figure, albeit it [is] perhaps not necessarily that of an angel. It is a lesser-known image in Benjamin scholarship, one hardly ever commented upon—a picture, moreover, that could well be regarded to be the Renaissance counter-part or mirror-image to Klee’s modernist watercolor, namely Dürer’s engraving *Melencolia I* from the year 1514” (998).

imagined angel aloft into a metaphysical space emphatically distinguished from the earthly perspective of the reader (“Wo [...] vor *uns* erscheint, da sieht *er*” [his emphases throughout]). Nothing actually in Klee’s painting contributes to or detracts from Benjamin’s claims.

In that anomaly characteristic of metaphysical accounts, the aphorist from the human community (“*uns*”) is for the remainder imbued with the impossible power to focalize his report from the supra-human searching angelic perspective (“sieht *er*,” “Er möchte,” “der Engel [...] nicht mehr [...] kann”). This contradiction persists until the final sentence. The spatial elevation and expansion is accompanied for the magical angel with an access to an extended temporality, but one quasi-apodictically limited to past time—another imposition, here on the entirely formless, unmarked space in which Klee’s angel floats. Against the fixed present of humans below who process historical time sequentially and cumulatively (“Wo eine Kette von Begebenheiten vor *uns* erscheint”), the aphorist’s angel is accorded a comprehensive view, from Paradise to the present, of the single big disaster that is human history (“da sieht *er* eine einzige Katastrophe”). In this allegory of history, the theological fiction of a paradise lost is posited as a temporal and spatial origin for the singular inescapable causal force impelling that history towards a disastrous future (“Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her”).

That is, despite his redemptive intentions (“Er möchte [...] das Zerschlagene zusammenfügen”), the storm from Paradise renders the angel of history in a state of paralysis (“[der Sturm] sich in seinen Flügeln verfangen hat und so stark ist, daß der Engel sie nicht mehr schließen kann”). Once these metaphysical, metahistorical coordinates are established, the narrative-semantic content of the aphorism follows readily: the lost Paradise of the Bible disallows human history, despite any good intentions, from being anything but a relentless (“unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer häuft”), ever-increasing (“der Trümmerhaufen [...] zum

Himmel wächst”), and unstoppable catastrophe. This angelology would definitively re-enchant contemporary progressivist understandings by pointing to the intractable supernatural force driving human history (“was wir den Fortschritt nennen, ist *dieser* Sturm”). This fairly simple story is not without plotting problems, however. In particular, two key disjunctions between the semantic content and the deictics of this aphorism are worth noting.

First, Benjamin draws great power from his dismissal of naive social and historical positivisms that view history or society as allowing a linear progression into ever-greater freedoms and achievements. Yet he conceptually refuses not only a linearly increasing progress, but also any alternative visions of progress. By simply re-nominating “progress” as “*this* storm,” he replaces positivism’s naiveté with a temporal schema that is no less naively linear in the path it draws from Paradise through the present straight to the implied future of divine judgment. Indeed, this heavenly storm lacking crosswinds and eddies has no correlate in the fluid dynamics of this world and suggests a hidden wind machine in Benjamin’s metaphysical system. Benjaminians may want to worry over this homology between positivism and theology, over the great power Benjamin draws from the positivistic anti-positivist Biblical cadences in which he phrases his putatively “historical materialist” concern.

And second, the sweeping historical argument offered is at odds with the presentism of the aphorism’s temporal markers. Where we might expect that a storm has always been blowing from Paradise, and that the allegorical angel of history’s wings have always been immobilized in its current, we are instead offered the familiar scene of a supposedly world-historical dynamic that just so happens to reach a crisis point in the writer’s lifetime. So in the aphorism’s present tense it is clear that for Benjamin the storm has just now reached windspeeds allowing the capture of the angel’s wings. Again, a Benjaminian may choose to worry over yet another

universal theology whose rhetorical force hinges on the exceptionalism of a present that within the logic of that theological frame has no exceptional status.²⁷

No comprehensive perspective on the events of human history could produce an allegorization so linear and presentist. In fact, a key question that Benjamin's aphorism raises is what exactly the angel of history represents. Conventionally, angels are relays between heaven and earth, thus endowed with agency and at least potentially susceptible to Satanic aberrance in function, but Benjamin's angel does not relay between God and man, Paradise and Earth, desire and actuality. This is a strange angel, indeed, who is incapacitated by the force of a transcendental order of which it ought, in one viable reading, to be actually a part, but similarly lacks all agency in the terrestrial order, whose cultural activity, in the other viable reading, it ought to personify. He is neither an angel who personifies human history nor an angel entrusted with the care of human history. In lacking both transcendental power and human agency, the angel is pre-figured to impotence.

In "The Swan," Baudelaire offers a less simple account of the entanglement of the present with the past, but no less rhetorically stunning illuminations of the modern condition. The present in this case is the Paris emerging from the urban renovations supervised by Baron Haussmann during the Second Empire of Napoleon III ("Le vieux Paris n'est plus"). The poem's speaker, contemplating his sense of displacement, is situated at the site of a completed renovation, the Place du Carrousel between the Louvre and the then-standing Tuileries Palace.²⁸

²⁷ Michel Foucault in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" diagnoses this common failure to see the present as merely the "current episode" of a history that is continuing: "As it is wrong to search for descent in an uninterrupted continuity, we should avoid thinking of emergence as the final term of an historical development. [...] These developments may appear as a culmination, but they are merely the current episodes in a series of subjugations" (148).

²⁸ The speaker does not emphasize the significance of the spot for French historical memory, presumably anticipating its appearance to his audience. Among other roles, the Place du Carrousel

In the midst of this rumination, the poem commences with an invocation (“je pense à vous!”) of an anguished exile, the Andromache of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the Trojan hero Hector’s widow, carried to Greece as a slave of Achilles’ son Pyrrhus. The apostrophizer emblemizes her grief by imagining her tears formerly (“jadis”) enlarging a Greek river “lyingly” renamed after the Trojan Simois (“Simois menteur”).^{29 30} However, in an upending of the traditional valorization of authentic origins, the apostrophizer proclaims that, in fact, his memory is fecundated and his poetic statement is inspired by this ersatz river of tears (“par vos pleurs grandit”). In a poem awash in waterways, the impoverished and sad (“Pauvre et triste”) Simois’s metonymic inspiration initiates a refiguration of the conventionally-drawn links between origin, loss, melancholy, and creativity.

What Andromache’s sorrow brings to fruit is a succession of visions of the Carrousel in the poet’s earlier days. The poet accents the disorientation of finding his habitual environs—even with the foreknowledge of their imminent metamorphosis under Haussmann’s scheme—made spectral (“Je ne vois qu’en esprit”). For the nostalgic vision he calls up is of that spot already a

witnessed the siege of the Tuileries Palace on the 10th of August (1792) and was an early station for the guillotine (1792-1793), the first site where that device was used for political executions.

²⁹ A knowledge of the *Aeneid*, again presumably taken as apparent, would fill in Andromache’s location as Epirus in Greece, where in Book 3 Aeneas comes upon her during her annual mourning ritual at Hector’s cenotaph on the banks of the replacement Simois. She relates her abandonment by Pyrrhus and remarriage to his Trojan slave (and Hector’s brother) Helenus, who upon Pyrrhus’s death has constructed a city modeled on Troy.

³⁰ Alessandro Barchiesi, in “Lane-switching and Jughandles in Contemporary Interpretations of Roman Poetry,” wittily highlights the ever-receding origins in Baudelaire’s invocation of Virgil: “The false Troy on the coast of Epirus has become Troytown—like Chinatown, a theme park of dislocation and alienness. The distance from the classical tradition, which is both lying and debased in Baudelaire’s Paris, contributes to the original pathos of the situation in Virgil. [...] This way the episode becomes a *mise en abîme* of Virgil’s poetic agenda” (147-148). David Quint, in “Painful Memories: ‘Aeneid’ 3 and the Problem of the Past,” highlights Virgil’s own more reactionary approach to historical memory and nation-building. Quint argues that the epic ultimately endorses an efficacious mourning in the face of spectral Andromache and Helenus’s dissipating melancholia: “This initial meeting establishes the thematic argument [...]: the dead Trojan past of Hector cannot be brought back to life; the Roman future of Aeneas has taken its place. [...] Virgil’s fiction thus repeats the *Odyssey*’s own gesture towards the *Iliad*—by assigning the two heroes of the earlier poem to the underworld” (33).

site of jarring contrasts amidst the renovation activity. Structural elements of neoclassical construction awaiting their eventual employment—unornamented capitals and column shafts heaped alongside stone blocks (“tas de chapiteaux ébauchés et de fûts [...] les gros blocs”)—are juxtaposed with the makeshift premises (“ce camp de baraques”) and teeming commerce (“brillant aux carreaux, le bric-à-brac confus”) that characterized the network of cramped blocks that had over time encroached into the plaza.³¹ A further effort of imagining animates an earlier Carrousel even more inaccessible. Though of the poet’s lifetime (“(la forme d’une ville / Change plus vite, hélas! Que le cœur d’un mortel)”), it is both thematically (“mythe étrange et fatal”) and temporally (“jadis”) aligned with the distant past of Andromache, its inhabitants blurring into quasi-mythic daemons (“le Travail s’éveille”).

In brief, the poet remembers a menagerie that stood there once, and how one morning he saw an escaped swan drag its feathers along a dry, rough path near a waterless gutter, open its beak, and anxiously bathe its wings in the dust. And then the swan spoke, demanding to know when rain, thunder, and lightning will return (“«Eau, quand donc pleuvras-tu? quand tonneras-tu, foudre?»”). At this point, a literalist reader—taken with the wrenching account of the swan’s home-lake-sickness (“le cœur plein de son beau lac natal”)—might extend the chain of displacements from new Paris to old Paris, from human settlement to a menagerie, from a dry gutter to a beautiful birth lake, from city to country, from culture to nature, all the way back to a

³¹ *Galignani’s New Paris Guide* (1855), in praising new buildings, notes that “[w]here these now stand, dark and filthy streets, and mean-looking houses, defiled by their presence the magnificent buildings around, while the carriage-way to the Louvre was lined with unseemly booths, where the thrifty citizen might find any kind of commodity, from the second-hand book to the rusty nail. In the short space of five years, all this has been swept away, and the noble structures now in progress date but from the beginning of 1852” (170). Georges Eugène Haussmann himself remarks in his *Mémoires* on his “rancor” over the “shame” that the old Carrousel brought upon France: “Depuis ma jeunesse, l’état délabré de la Place du Carrousel, devant la Cour des Tuileries, me semblait être une honte pour la France, un aveu d’impuissance de son Gouvernement, et je lui gardais rancune” (40; Since my youth, the dilapidated state of the Place du Carrousel, before the Court of the Tuileries, seemed to me a shame for France, a confession of the impotence of its Government, and I resented it).

Paradise. But the desire for a supposed Paradise's redemption—in another rhetorical upending of expectations—is decisively ironized by the swan's anthropomorphization.³² Even readers deaf to the homophony of the Swan's "Eau" and an apostrophizer's "O,"³³ or unmindful of Baudelaire's earlier figuration in "The Albatross" of poets as pitifully incapacitated birds, might pause at the moment before the swan's speech when the poem's focalization blurs the apostrophizer's consciousness with the hidden content of the bird's heart. The swan's trudge and complaints, far from voicing a "natural" desire, more plausibly disclose a figurative arraignment of lyric poets' pseudo-shamanistic histrionics. Just meters from the waters of the Seine, this metaphysically-oriented poet-swan musters little more than self-pity to alleviate its drought.

Thus, instead of eliding Andromache and the swan as akin figures of loss and grief, or highlighting their "common feature[s]," as Benjamin would, the rhetoric of the poem encourages us to view their aquatic yearnings as disparate aesthetic practices. Andromache's generatively re-signifies and re-assembles a future out of memories of a lost past and the materials of the present: a "lying" Troy on the banks of a "lying" Simois. The swan's futilely engages in an other-worldly attempt ("Vers le ciel ironique et cruellement bleu") to redeem inexorable losses: like man in Ovid's cosmogony, fashioned from mud, but commanded to always distract his

³² Katherine Elkins in "Stalled Flight: Horatian Remains in Baudelaire's 'Le Cygne'" traces the convention of poet-as-swan back to Horace's account in Ode 2.20, where "the memorial swan functions as the vehicle for extension through space and time, a guarantor of presence to future times and places." In contrast, she notes how Baudelaire's figuration is "no longer a prophecy of his own immortality" but "reveals a strange and fatal mortality that can only be comprehended as myth. This myth, however, is already visible in the poet's inability to be fully present even in the present because of memories of the past that haunt his inner vision" (4, 9-10). Elkins, too, helps foreclose a reading that locates ultimate meaning in the swan's autochthonous yearnings.

³³ This line of reasoning is heavily indebted to Jonathan Culler's insights on Baudelaire's irony in his essay "Apostrophe." Culler reads "parody" into the poem's "apostrophic procedures," noting that "[t]he coincidence of 'O' and *Eau* can be variously interpreted: the nostalgic quest for a moment or place of origin, the 'eau' of a 'beau lac natal,' yields only an 'O' of a trope; or, the pun identifies the potential addressee of every apostrophe as the apostrophic 'O' itself and makes every apostrophe an invocation of invocation" (64).

glance skyward (“Vers le ciel quelquefois, comme l’homme d’Ovide”).³⁴ Andromache and the swan do not simply represent this aesthetic fecundity and sterility; within the structure of the poem their invocations perform it. Just as reflection on Andromache initiates the poem’s conceptual motion, reflection on the swan engenders conceptual paralysis. The poet-swan’s celestial convulsions (“son cou convulsif”) bring section I to an abrupt, inconclusive end. Section II resumes with the poet fixated (“rien dans ma mélancolie / N’a bougé!”), burdened by his memories, and oppressed by a vision of the swan. Only a recollection of the no-less-grieved Andromache’s resilience in abiding her inexorable losses—of status, freedom (“Vil bétail”), homeland, husband, son—releases the poet from solipsism into an ethical concern wrung from a terrestrially-oriented (“en extase courbée”) distress.

Starting with an asymmetrical third “Je pense à,” quickly followed by four further elliptical invocations of that syntax, the conceptual ground fertilized by the proxy Simois takes full flower.³⁵ Against the abrupt, inhuman break that sends the angel of history aloft, divorced from the human cultural object that merely occasioned his invocation, Baudelaire’s expansion of conceptual scope is achieved through a multiplication of associations that simultaneously extend farther into the profane world and deeper into the poet’s psyche. The wife Andromache (“femme d’Hélénus”) generates another phantasmatic woman (“la négresse”) who also yearns for a scene (“Les cocotiers absents”) from a *beau pays natal* (“de la superbe Afrique”).³⁶ This gaunt

³⁴ I thank an anonymous reader for the journal *Comparative Literature* for pointing out a further way in which this line supports a reading of Baudelaire’s entirely terrestrial concerns: lurking behind the metaphysical “homme d’Ovide” stands the homophonic “homme de vide” (empty man).

³⁵ In *Baudelaire in 1859*, Richard D.E. Burton provides a compelling meditation on this water motif: “The river-poem began as a ‘pauvre et triste miroir’ of the sufferings of a single widow woman; when it reaches the sea it reflects the bereavement and loss of all humanity and can still look oceanwards ‘aux matelots oubliés dans une île / Aux captifs, aux vaincus! ... à bien d’autres encor!’ for further casualties to include in its embrace” (165).

³⁶ A fascinating discussion, beyond the scope of this essay, of possible historical/geographical referents for this figure is found in Françoise Lionnet’s rejoinder, “Reframing Baudelaire: Literary

(“amaigrie”) woman unfurls imagery of gaunt orphans (“maigres orphelins”) who are dessicated (“séchant”) like the dry lane (“pavé sec”) on which the swan plods. The disorienting fog (“brouillard”) behind which the black woman treads suggests the disorienting forest (“forêt”) in which the poet’s soul (“mon esprit”) exiles itself (“s’exile”). This imagery of exile recalls the swan, ridiculous like an exile (“Comme les exilés, ridicule”), and calls forth the abandonment of shipwrecked sailors (“matelots oubliés dans une île”). The woman’s searching (“cherchant”) evokes everyone’s experience of having lost (“A quiconque a perdu ce qui ne se retrouve”). The resultant tears (“s’abreuvent de pleurs”) recall not only the flooding tears (“pleurs grandit”) of Andromache that feed her Simois, but also the rain wished for by the swan (“pleuvras-tu?”) trailing its wings in the dust (“dans la poudre”) that has turned to Ovidian mud (“dans la boue”) for the black woman.

The final stanza makes unmistakable the rewired connection between loss, memory, melancholy, and ethics. An old memory leads not a mute paralysis but rather an eloquent cry of concern for the inhabitants of a radically heterogeneous world, from an individual, presumably known woman (“*la negresse*”) to a vague but finite group (“quiconque”) to, in the final invocation in the fourth “Je pense,” a proliferation of populations (“Aux captifs, aux vaincus! ... à bien d’autres encor!”). Melancholy is in no way overcome, but its resounding echoes draw the mind to an ethical concern outside its parish. In this narrative submission to the historical and geographical vastness and heterogeneity of the world; in the speculative outward, not upward, projection of correspondences into obscure consummations; in the attention to the sympathetic echoes that memory’s “plein souffle du cor” can precipitate; in the endless displacement of

History, Biography, Postcolonial Theory, and Vernacular Languages,” to, among other works, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Imperialism and Sexual Difference.” Unlike Spivak, my reading does not consider the black woman “seemingly irrelevant to the poem’s proper functioning” (230).

origins; and in an anticlimax of unknowability (“...”) rather than a confident universal truth, Baudelaire marks a second crucial difference from Benjamin.³⁷ Here there is no angelic view, no cogent meta-narrative; the poet’s vision and knowledge give out at an earthly distal, temporal, and historical range, and in this sputtering in the face of an earth ridiculous and sublime the poem acquires its distinctive conceptual power.³⁸

One need not subscribe to every detail of this reading to agree that “The Swan” formulates human afflictions no less comprehensively, and arguably more compassionately, than Benjamin’s aphorism. The poem does not, however, offer in response escape routes to the transcendental. Baudelaire stages the formidable challenge of practicing aesthetics and ethics in a world whose contingencies and diverse extent defeat all attempts at mastery. He overcomes both the narcotic rigidity of an allegorical vision (“tout pour moi devient allégorie”) in which temporal events merely reflect otherworldly meanings and also the temptation of casting a loss of metaphysical confidence as Benjaminian “decrepitude.” Instead, he offers a non-allegorical figure for signification in Hector’s cenotaph (“un tombeau vide”): a woman-made construction marking an irrecoverable loss that incites, rather than deters, the poet’s creation. The swan in “Le

³⁷ These formulations on “The Swan” are entirely consonant with Ross Chambers’ in *The Writing of Melancholy*: “Although ‘fertile’ memory opens out eventually onto melancholy—as an absurd mulling over occupying the temporality of history, always incomplete and unfulfilled—melancholy ultimately reveals itself, then, to be oddly nurturing: one can live on melancholy, however poorly and painfully. One can build in melancholy, even if what one constructs is only a ‘lying Simoïs’ that is forever swelling with tears” (169).

³⁸ In “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric,” Paul de Man notes similar nonfulfillment with similar effect in the closing of “Correspondences”: “Instead of analogy, we have enumeration, and an enumeration which never moves beyond the confines of a set of particulars [...] For what could be more perverse or corruptive for a metaphor aspiring to transcendental totality than remaining stuck in an enumeration that never goes anywhere? If number can only be conquered by another number, if identity becomes enumeration, then there is no conquest at all” (250). Edward J. Ahearn, in “Black Woman, White Poet: Exile and Exploitation in Baudelaire’s Jeanne Duval Poems,” also notes the dynamic of an expansive “enumeration” in “The Swan”: “And from personal memory it attains the universal. From a particular image of exile from nature which the speaker had once seen [...] it moves to an enumeration which by the end of the poem includes all mankind [...] Thus the poem views all men as in some way ‘exilés, ridicule[s] et sublime[s], / Et rongé[s] d’un désir sans trêve!’” (219).

Cygne” serves to ironize a transcendental model of its homophone “le signe.” If, as Benjamin says, “[i]t is no accident that it is an allegory,” it is not a record of decrepitude, but rather an allegory of modes of representation, and to the extent that it “has the movement of a cradle rocking back and forth between modernity and antiquity,” it is unbound to Benjaminian teleologies, finding continuity instead in the intrinsic melancholy of the human culture-making project (“Paris” 82; *AP* 356).³⁹

Toward George Orwell

In a note, Benjamin writes, “[e]s hat wenig Wert, die Position eines Baudelaire in das Netz der vorgeschobensten im Befreiungskampf der Menschheit einbeziehen zu wollen” (*Gesammelte* 1.3:1161; it has little worth to want to include the position of a Baudelaire in the network of the most advanced in the liberation struggle of mankind). My aim has been to both expose the unfounded severity of such a judgment and to highlight the costs of automatically endorsing it. Writers such as Adorno and Derrida have alerted us to the danger of taking Benjamin’s messianism as something more hospitable to human interests than it is, especially in its eschatological rush to foreclose on the realm of human endeavor and its cruelty in subjecting present human sufferings to a mythical cause and an uncontrollable mythical resolution.

The attraction of Benjamin’s promise to reconcile literary culture, socialist politics, and messianic faith is undeniable. In “Futures: Specters and Angels: Benjamin and Derrida,” Wendy Brown speaks clearly of the consolatory function Benjamin’s transcendentalism performs in our

³⁹ Lowry Nelson, Jr., in “Baudelaire and Virgil: A Reading of ‘Le Cygne,’” clearly notes the poem’s suggestion of the enduring innateness of the afflictions that Benjamin would historicize and localize: “The human condition is one of inescapable exile. A sensitive spirit can never be ‘dans le vrai.’ One of the great ironies of the poem is that people can be exiles, as the poet is (he perhaps most pitiable of all), in their own native place. It is not so much an urban alienation from nature as it is the self-reflexive curse of mankind” (345).

theoretical imaginary: “It is an opening for both the messianic dreams *and* the human crafting that are erased by progressive historiography and politics. Thus does postfoundationalism potentially become at once spiritual and historical: its challenge to historical automatism reactivates the figures banished by that automatism—conscious and unconscious memories, hopes, and longings” (143, 160). Brown’s rhetoric does not, however, disguise the illusoriness of such reconciliation of the mystical and the material, as in the figurative slippages in lauding the “grounds—or at least handholds or windows on possibility” thus offered. The closer we look at Benjamin’s words, the more elusive these possibilities become.

To endorse Benjamin’s vision of modernity is to refuse an alternative genealogy of modernity that could well take, once free and clear of Benjamin’s shadow, Baudelairean “contingency” as its watchword and Baudelaire’s complex staging of irresolvable psychic and social antagonisms as its praxis. It is to endorse a thought in which the human and the cultural are slighted as an incidental ground on which to posit an inevitable transcendental condition. It is to risk rendering our “dark times” a celestial affliction, insusceptible to human comprehension or intervention. Baudelaire’s appealing alternative works within the reality that, as he says in “The Painter of Modern Life,” “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” are an integral part of human culture, and that the greatest cultural achievements of the past have wrestled with them (13). Just as “[e]very old master has had his own modernity,” he suggests that our own will only emerge from a grappling with our era’s contingencies, however disorienting, however demoralizing, however conducive to nostalgic relief. In a trenchant passage, aimed so squarely at his most influential twentieth-century reader, Baudelaire warns, the “transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid, must on no account be despised or dispensed with. By

neglecting it, you cannot fail to tumble into the abyss of an abstract and indeterminate beauty, like that of the first woman before the fall of man.”

In the two chapters of the next part, I will turn to a writer who more explicitly considers the relation between fundamental antagonisms, autonomous art, and the public and private sphere, George Orwell. Baudelaire draws aesthetic-ethical resources from his unflinching understanding of sexual relations, but writers like Orwell, as here in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, attempt to relate those relations directly to the darkening political scene:

He looked at the darkening street, at the greyish reflection of his face in the pane, at the shabby figures shuffling past. Almost involuntarily he repeated:

C'est l'Ennui—l'œil chargé d'un pleur involontaire,

Il rêve d'échafauds en fumant son houka!

Money, money! Corner Table! The humming of the aeroplanes and the crash of the bombs. (21)

PART THREE:

Contingency and/as Liberty

CHAPTER 5:

Some Versions of Pastoral in *Burmese Days*:

Orwell, Empson, and Narrative without Naturalism

Orwell as Novelist

The last two chapters discussed Walter Benjamin's attempts to critique the conceptual, social, and political distortions attendant upon the rise of capitalism. Benjamin's project is clearly animated by a commitment to justice for those oppressed by these movements, but he offers no practical political program, or theoretical grounds for constructing or animating one, for bringing this justice about, only occasionally endorsing revolutionary-utopian counter-forces of uncertain origin and function.¹ In this and the following chapter, I investigate the writings of George Orwell, another leftist writer of the 1930s also animated by the injustices promulgated by contemporary European politics and political economy. In contrast to Benjamin, whose writing is mainly focused on the cultural realm, Orwell pursues a more direct critique of actually-existing political institutions and political policies. And though he, like Benjamin, affiliates himself with socialism, Orwell's standpoint is not within Marxism, but instead within a more pragmatic mainstream tradition, one that conceives itself an adjunct to or radicalization of liberalism rather than as an upheaval of it. In this and the following chapter, I will explore the narrative structure of Orwell's political novels, and argue that they reveal radical liberalism encountering difficulties not so different from those that bedevil Benjamin's work.

¹ The closest thing to a political program in Benjamin's thought would be a text like "Critique of Violence." This text, however, is not in any meaningful sense engaged with actual political processes, offering instead an appeal to the potential of mystic-anarchic-revolutionary violence and redemption. This kind of precipitous and righteous rejection of actual political processes and blanket denunciation of political tendencies unfortunately characterizes much of contemporary leftist cultural-critical discourse, in part explaining Benjamin's enduring appeal.

Orwell serves as a useful representative of 1930s political thought for at least two reasons. First, as I have suggested, Orwell's 1930s output engages a configuration of quintessentially "modern" concerns that map very well onto Baudelaire's and Benjamin's and exemplify key issues of this dissertation: primarily those relating to the conceptual relation of literary-aesthetic objects and theories, on the one hand, and psychological and social-political structures and theories, on the other. Orwell also, like Baudelaire and occasionally Benjamin, finds himself gauging or approaching the socio-political stresses in his world via their effects on sexual relations. Second, Orwell provides a complex defense of what he acknowledges is an imperfect liberal democracy in its centuries-old British manifestation, both explicitly in his essays and implicitly in his fictions. Since secular liberal democracy is the institutional common sense of the contemporary West (and the object of much heated contemporary cultural critique, especially in its purported metamorphosis into a "neoliberalism" irrevocably yoked with free market economics) and since Orwell's work has played a surprisingly notable role in cementing the contemporary West's sense of its intellectual and moral superiority to competing ideological world-systems, an engagement with Orwell is useful in understanding the current political scene and disrupting that common sense.²

I do not, however, turn to Orwell as offering the human political solution that eluded the inhumanly messianic Benjamin, the eccentrically asocial Baudelaire, or the humane yet

² Orwell's fixed place in secondary school reading lists, at least through the Cold War, is a good indication of his ideological function in at least American society. Another, related one is how much of the American criticism on Orwell has appeared in journals generally not patronized by self-defined academic elites, such as *College English*, *College Literature*, and *College Composition and Communication*, or outside the academic humanities altogether. Relatedly, Peter Marks in "Reputations: George Orwell" cites John Rodden to provide some of the steps in the "beatification" of Orwell: "Rodden details such important contributing forces as the co-opting of Orwell by the American right (who misread *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as anti-socialist rather than as anti-communist satires), the inclusion of these works in high-school curricula, the changing perceptions of Orwell by sections of the British left, Orwell's status behind the Iron Curtain, and the mythical cultural power (and marketing pull) of 1984" (84).

deterministic Marx. Instead, I examine Orwell's writings to stress the kinds of residual idealisms that even a nominally secular worldview can encounter and to lay out the conceptual extent and limits of liberal humanism. Indeed, while Orwell may in reputation be a fully politically-engaged writer—and there is no denying that he thoughtfully and directly engaged the realities of imperialism, poverty, and war—at crucial moments his texts betray a Benjaminian retreat from political antagonisms and a failure to further a vision of interpersonal relations or political action in which contingency (even if acknowledged as a key factor in psychic and social development) is given adequate due. Far from condemning his writings on this account, as many leftist critics who cherish their own alternative utopias do, I will instead argue that it is in this disclosure, however intentional or unintentional, of liberalism's aporias that their value as “modern” literature lies.

The approach below starts by explaining the particular methodology that will be used to attempt to clarify the issues in this debate, working not through an evaluation of Orwell's explicit political pronouncements, but primarily through the narrative structure of his fictions, deploying narratological concepts from William Empson and Mieke Bal, among others. Upon this grounding there follows in this chapter a close analysis of the narrative structure of Orwell's first novel *Burmese Days* (1934), focusing on its ideological implications. In the following chapter, the outlines of Orwell's “socialist liberalism” are filled in by extending the analysis to another novel, *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* (1936), and considering the well-known debate over the political significance of a third novel, *1984* (1949). This analysis will engage the divergent assessments by Raymond Williams and Richard Rorty in light of the above discussion and of the vexed place of liberalism in current academic discourse. Within this engagement, I offer an

argument relevant to the dissertation's larger concerns about modernity, aesthetics, politics, antagonism, and contingency.

Even though this chapter and the next will focus primarily on such politically-motivated engagements with Orwell's novels as those by Williams, Rorty, Terry Eagleton, Christopher Hitchens, and others, they do so in a way that foregrounds the literariness of the objects under contention. Even though these critics themselves assign various kinds of relevance to literature in their cultural-political theories, their critique or praise of Orwell's ideological tendencies and commitments do not feature sustained attention to the formal structure in which his political insights are encoded, relying more frequently on the explicit pronouncements of his protagonists or on appeals to Orwell's nonfiction and biography. This is a longstanding tendency in the critical reception of Orwell. For example, writing in "Symbol and Structure in *Burmese Days*: A Revaluation" in 1969, Robert A. Lee notes how "Orwell's early novels are either considered as glosses on his essays—a curious reversal of normal procedure—or as evidence of various interests he had" (819). In "Trends in Orwell Criticism: 1968-1983," an essay from 1984, Paul Schluetter notes specifically of *Burmese Days* (1934), Orwell's first novel and the one on which I will focus in this chapter, how it has "been given more biographical than formal analysis" (105).³ More recent criticism has expanded to consider the novel's relation to discourses surrounding British colonialism, but as before without sustained attention to the narrative structure within which those discourses are engaged.

³ Among this earlier criticism, a particularly informative account of the biographical and historical background of *Burmese Days*, with important details about the Burmese independence movement, is given by Maung Htin Aung, "George Orwell and Burma." As one particularly relevant example, Aung notes that "[a]s one of the new policies connected with the dyarchy reforms, the English Governor required the exclusive European clubs in the districts to extend their membership to one or two senior Burmese officials" (24).

By investigating the potential political import of narrative forms, I hope to further the discussion of the relationship between politics and literature along the lines that I sketched in the second chapter (i.e., seeing both as cognate kinds of formalizations more or less inadequate, but no less necessary for that, to the contingent features of the reality they would represent and both as susceptible to aesthetic analysis). Secondly I hope that the narratological orientation of this approach can provide a way beyond the intransigence of the ideological debates around Orwell's legacy. Indeed, what makes Orwell's writing valuable—what could account for its literariness—is the manner in which formally it performs an irresolution complicating the rather more confident ideological interpretations by socialists and liberals alike, including by Orwell at his most programmatic.

Narrative and Ideology: Empson and Bal

Even though from the perspective of a literary generalist, narratology is a highly-specialized and narrow practice, any attempt by such a literary generalist to deploy its insights or methods practically is quickly forced to recognize how multiple and un-systematized those practices called narratological really are.⁴ Even though one's intuition is that these diverse practices are generally highly compatible (they are after all going after the same thing with roughly similar analytical methods), they nonetheless employ a variety of distinct terminologies

⁴ One sample indication of the divergence in narratological practices is given by Monika Fludernik's objection in "History of Narratology: A Rejoinder" to David Darby's claim that "structuralist narratology and German Erzähltheorie have remained separate schools of thought" (405). Fludernik's response desires to highlight the complexity of narratology in its German guises, arguing against "Darby's one-sided presentation of the rather variegated field of German narratology" (408). But Fludernik also argues for German narratology's engagement with trends elsewhere, for example in Franz Stanzel's "incorporating a more structuralist format in response to the work of Gérard Genette" and in how "German narratologists do regularly read and take into account English-language narratological publications" (406). On this account Fludernik's rejoinder can also be taken as a call, one not explicitly given by her, to take a more coherent approach to narratological scholarship than one organized around national schools or prominent practitioners.

and schemas, sometimes highly technical ones dubiously aiming for scientificity.⁵ Relinquishing the pursuit or possibility of a grand unified theory of narrative, I have chosen for reasons of relevance (or at least partly coincidence) to rely chiefly on two narratologists: William Empson, a theorist of narrative who was a contemporary of Orwell's and an important literary figure of the 1930s in his own right, and Mieke Bal, who has provided the most insistent and compelling recent accounts of narratology's usefulness for ideology critique. Through careful analyses of a range of literary (and in Bal's case, also non-literary) texts, both tie together narrative structure and ideology in ways that are enlightening for a discussion of Orwell's novels as attempts to formalize and align contingent understandings of the self and society.

William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935) is superficially, in its title and marketing, an account of the English literary imagination's tendency to retreat to pastoral simplicity. Such a view, however, ignores the generality of Empson's ambitions, or at least of his results. Paul de Man, in "The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism," has made perhaps the most famous case for the need to separate Empson's insights from such narrow generic and thematic trappings. De Man comments that "[t]he tone of the exposition, as well as the selection of works commented upon in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, could lead to the supposition that he had

⁵ In a conversation published as "On Narrativity," Paul Ricoeur challenges Algirdas Julien Greimas's conception of narratology as a science of universal deep narrative structures. Ricoeur seeks to reverse Greimas's hierarchy, arguing "that surface is more than a kind of reflection of deep structure, it is more than the instantiation of narrative rules that can be construed at the deeper level," and claiming "finally that the deep structure reflects the surface and not the contrary" (552, 554). Greimas stubbornly insists on the scientific necessity of his approach, stating that "[i]t is only when a scientific project posits the objects it wishes to describe or construct at a specific level, and not at ten different levels, that it can hold a coherent discourse on these objects" and asks disparagingly of other approaches that focus on the figurative-discursive level of narratives, "What scientific status can be given to this type of task?" (554, 561). Greimas, at least, owns up to his metaphysical bent, stating that "when we speak about semio-narrative structures we are in fact dealing with kinds of universals of language, or rather with narrative universals. If we were not afraid of metaphysics we could say that these are properties of the human mind" (555). This debate over analyzing objects at one versus multiple levels has resonance with the note in chapter one discussing Eve Sedgwick's thoughts on the need for "finitely many" analytical categories.

undertaken the study of one literary form among others, and that this study could be followed by others in a similar vein, upon the epic tradition, let us say, or the tragic. Nothing could be further from the truth” (238). In fact, even the selection of works puts the lie to any reading of the book as genre study, since a cursory examination of its table of contents, which lists chapters on topics like proletarian literature, a Shakespeare sonnet, *The Beggar’s Opera* (under the rubric of “mock-pastoral”), and *Alice in Wonderland* (as the post-pastoral of the “child-cult”), makes clear how little Empson is concerned with the origins or transmutations of shepherds or nymphs in Arcadia or any particular genre or form (12, 13). Not only are Empson’s primary examples not in any obvious thematic sense pastoral, he himself acknowledges that “the cases I take are the surprising rather than the normal ones” (23). These surprising cases lead to some surprisingly general findings.

Empson encourages general readings, such as de Man’s, in multiple places and in multiple ways.⁶ For example, when discussing how proletarian literature might paradoxically fall under the rubric of the pastoral, he states that the “double attitude of the artist to the worker, of the complex man to the simple one (‘I am in one way better, in another not so good’) [...] may well recognise a permanent truth about the aesthetic situation” and that thus Empson’s “account

⁶ Christopher Norris has written thoughtfully on the extent of the overlap between Empson and de Man, the limits of which mainly concerns Empson’s seeming faith in establishing stable protocols of reading on the far side of the journey through textual ambiguity and complexity. On their similarities, in “Some Versions of Rhetoric: Empson and de Man” Norris writes: “They both insist on pressing their analysis of figural language to the point where it offers a maximal resistance to the habits of straightforward rational thought” (198). On their differences, in “Reason, Rhetoric, Theory: Empson and de Man” Norris writes: “Empson sets out the rationalist case against those forms of active false logic which interpreters are apt to raise into wholesale rhetorical creeds. De Man pursues such arguments up to a point, but finally doubts whether logic itself can be exempted from the omnipresent figural drive within language” (106). De Man’s reading of Empson shares features with his reading of Benjamin: in both cases, there is unjustified ideological confidence that if the other critic followed his thoughts to their logical conclusion, he would find himself aligned with de Man.

of proletarian literature [...] applies to any good literature whatever” (14, 18).⁷ Accordingly, Empson asks rhetorically about “how far the ideas of pastoral in this wide sense are universal” and suggests, in indirect response, that “taken widely the formula might include all literature” (20, 23). De Man follows Empson’s clear lead, endorsing a view that the insights of the book on literature’s relation to social reality as an aesthetic formalization that is by definition a simplification (“putting the complex into the simple”) may have a more general import far beyond its purchase on the specific simplifications that motivate cosmopolitans to place their thoughts into the mouths of rustics (22).⁸ De Man, in his own distinctive philosophical idiom,

⁷ In *What is Pastoral?*, Paul Alpers helpfully glosses the former quote in this way: “This double attitude responds, and the aesthetic situation corresponds, to what Empson regards as permanent conditions of life in human societies. Hence, the pastoral process is not called into question by reality as we know it, nor is it to be expected to transcend or transform it. Empsonian pastoral lives in the present, because that is all it has” (41). In “Empson on Pastoral,” Alpers points out some of the same features in Empson that had interested de Man, but eventually offers a secular humanist, and often muddled and circular, Empson. Alpers less distills the conceptual core of Empson’s method than he offers a super-subtle reconciliation of every piece of it based on the vague dictum: “The first thing one must do with what Empson says [...] is to understand precisely that it is something Empson says” (103). Alpers says of his humanist Empson: “The human condition, to him, is always historical and social, and on the highest throne in the world we are still sitting only on our own rump. But if Empson lets the tragic sense of life go, he gives us, in compensation, a sense of the strength, fullness, and human reality of our ordinary gestures and expressions” (119-120).

⁸ Leo Marx in “Pastoral and Its Guises” makes a very similar point: “It is pastoralism as an ethos which may provide the bridge we are looking for between literature and that other extra literary reality we so often designate as ‘society’” (359). Nonetheless Marx criticizes Empson for divorcing pastoral too abruptly from its Arcadian associations: “Empson knew better, but he went too far in the opposite direction, taking such a latitudinarian view of the subject (not to mention an opaque one) that he frightened away many scholars” (358). It is to be hoped that scholars are slowly beginning to catch up with Empson’s expansive insights. Raymond Williams (a critic to whom I will return in some detail at the end of the following chapter) also criticizes Empson, though not by name in a chapter on “Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral” in his *The Country and the City*: “the ordinary modern meaning of pastoral, in the critical discourse of otherwise twentieth-century writers, has been derived from these forms [the post-medieval allegorical reading of pastoral], rather than from the original substance or from its more significant successors. ‘Pastoral’ means, we are told, the simple matter in which general truths are embodied or implied: even a modern proletarian industrial novel can be pastoral in this sense!” (21).

transmutes Empson's glimmering awareness into a statement of the fundamental nature of all literature:⁹

What is the pastoral convention, then, if not the eternal separation between the mind that distinguishes, negates, legislates, and the originary simplicity of the natural? [...] There is no doubt that the pastoral theme is, in fact, the only poetic theme, that it is poetry itself.

Under the deceitful title of a genre study, Empson has actually written an ontology of the poetic, but wrapped it, as was his wont, in some extraneous matter that may well conceal the essential. (239)

Though there is no denying that the provocative and productive nature of de Man's move here, he, as was *his* wont, over-dramatizes his claim, leaping a little too fast to the essential.¹⁰ I want to linger a bit longer on at least one of the "extraneous" forms that the poetic might take.

⁹ Though de Man does not comment on Empson's idiosyncratic notion of "comic primness," Alpers' discussion of it suggests a striking parallel to de Man's notion of the "rhetorization of grammar" in his "Semiology and Rhetoric." Alpers summarizes "comic primness" as "a form of irony which works by having a character say something in (apparently) perfect innocence which at the same time is felt to open up a range of critical attitudes and ironic perspectives. It is not surprising to be told of Polly Peachum that 'the fascination of the character is that one has no means of telling whether she is simple or ironical'" (232). The Empsonian twist is that this puzzle and the power it implies are attributed to all speakers, even the most sophisticated, including the author of the work in which Polly appears" (*Pastoral* 40). De Man exemplifies the "rhetorization of grammar" with the case of that most sophisticated "archie de-Bunker" Jacques Derrida, were he to ask "What is the Difference?": "we cannot even tell from his grammar whether he 'really' wants to know 'what' difference is or is just telling us that we shouldn't even try to find out." With this "rhetorization of grammar," an effect which de Man posits as the characteristic one of literature, it becomes "impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings (that can be entirely incompatible) prevails" (10).

¹⁰ De Man acknowledges that he has offered "an interpretation and not an exposition" of Empson and "that the author especially [...] would have some difficulty endorsing it" (241). This is hardly false modesty on de Man's part given Empson's prickly attitude towards theoretical engagements with his work, especially from American academics, as in his response to Roger Sale's more seemingly congenial and historically-specific claims for Empson's significance in "The Achievement of William Empson." Sale writes that *Some Versions of Pastoral* should be seen as "a history of literary responses to disintegration," generally meaning the fractured social picture of post-feudal modernity, and argues that "[t]he splendor of Empson's book is that it can show the narrowing of feeling that accompanied change without falling into nostalgia itself" (382, 383). In (charmingly?) curmudgeonly letter to the editor Empson replies: "I was delighted to find myself praised by Roger Sale, and with such eloquence and extravagance too, for what I would most hope to be praised for, that is, for being large-minded and

Indeed, even as de Man can find ample support in the bedrock of Empson's thought for his own thesis about literature's formalizations of an "originary simplicity of the natural" and his own interest in more clearly aligning semiotics as a practice of structural decoding with rhetorical analysis as a practice of reading, it is instructive to pause and focus on Empson's interest in the "extraneous" historical variations in the uses of "the whole set of pastoral ideas," which "are likely to attempt to reconcile some conflict between the parts of a society," since "literature is a social process, and also an attempt to reconcile the conflicts of an individual in whom those of society will be mirrored" (19). Simply as a practical matter it is useful to not rush to the "ontology of the poetic," since to do so risks turning all literary criticism, at best, into repetitive variations on a theme (i.e., all texts as windows to that deeper ontological understanding) and, at worst, into superficial (or "historical") skirting of weightier philosophical matters. Instead, I want to highlight those aspects of Empson's method that are useful and prescient for the contextual analysis of narratives in their specific social and historical manifestations. As I have said, the kind of pastoral/poetic labor that I am interested in in Orwell relates to how a certain ideology of early twentieth-century radical liberalism manifests itself in the narrative structure of his novels. Empson provides tools for undertaking this kind of narratological analysis in his constant regard for literary texts as, first, constructs that always, second, relate to the antagonisms of a certain worldview.

Empson's structuralist imagination manifests itself most clearly in *Some Versions of Pastoral* in his use of terms like "trick," "machinery," or "device" to describe the techniques of literary writers. Such terms communicate an awareness, still not entirely commonplace in literary criticism, that literary effects are not created by language's unmediated transmission of

resisting the sordidity of modern Eng Lit. But the poor young man, I soon found, has been so corrupted by his education that he can achieve this only at moments" (535).

experiences or thoughts. Instead, Empson asks us to consider the specific textual rhetoric and structure whereby any kind of realism (whether psychological, political, social, natural, or otherwise) comes to be experienced as such by a reader. “Trick” in particular has a prominent place in his lexicon, appearing over 50 times in the book. For example, in considering the figuration in Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” of unrealized human potential as an undiscovered gem or unseen flower, Empson states that “this may trick us into feeling it is lucky for the poor man that society keeps him unspotted from the World” (4).¹¹ And in considering his nominally central theme of Arcadia he says how “[t]he essential trick of the old pastoral, which was felt to imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor, was to make simple people express strong feelings (felt as the most universal subject, something fundamentally true about everybody) in learned and fashionable language (so that you wrote about the best subject in the best way)” (11). In both cases, “trick” carries an ambivalent charge, generally referring to an awareness of artifice at work, but never shedding the sense of a deception.

“Machinery” and “device” (occurring around 15 times each) do similar work. For example, when discussing how writers’ tendency to focus on “poor or low characters merely because their lives more than most are grindingly and obviously ruled by Fate [...] is supposed to make us feel that the same is true of every one,” Empson states that “[m]ost writers on Fate play this trick; it uses a piece of pastoral machinery which is generally dignified into bad metaphysics” (10). “Machinery” highlights even further the possibly occluded linguistic

¹¹ Oleg Gelikman writes astutely in “‘Cold Pastoral’: Werner Herzog’s Version of Empson” of Empson’s ultimate ambivalence towards Gray’s elegy, an attitude that wavers between a critique of the poem’s complacent wistfulness and a validation of its essential melancholy: “Pastoral achieves its deepest resonance when it engages social antagonism as an irreducible, mythic element of the political; when it intuits and exploits the ambiguous relations we forge with its promises and evasions; when, instead of urging the imminence or pastness of the idyllic state, it reconciles us to the fact that desire for such a state can neither be fulfilled nor obliterated” (1148).

structuration that produces the naturalized trick on the reader, a trick into taking a simplified aestheticization as an elegant metaphysical truth. And Empson says when considering the double plot of Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* that "[i]t is an easy-going device, often used simply to fill out a play, and has an obvious effect in the Elizabethans of making you feel the play deals with life as a whole" (27). "Device" in particular encourages a mode of thinking that highlights a formal or figurative convention as convention. Thus, even though Empson has no systematic view of literary structures to offer, no full inventory of devices or machinery or tricks, his sharp perception of certain individual operative structures almost demands an extension to structure in general. For my purposes, the device of the double plot alone, as a formal literary convention for suggesting "life as a whole," one that Empson discovers primarily in early modern England, will prove surprisingly fruitful for a reading of Orwell's twentieth-century novels, whose most striking formal feature is exactly such plots.¹²

Needless to say the complexity of any society can hardly be adequately conceived in two levels, but there is a persistent aesthetic tendency to try, perhaps particularly given the lack of conceptual resources in modern political theory to think social units bigger than the family and smaller than the state. Empson brings out one form of the early modern version of this tendency most clearly in his reading of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays, in which the shift of scene from

¹² While there is a considerable body of criticism investigating double plot structures in early modern literature, among the smaller number of analyses that recognizes the more general import of the form is Peter K. Garrett's "Double Plots and Dialogical Form In Victorian Fiction." What Garrett, who cites Empson along the way, says of the "large loose baggy monsters" of the Victorian period applies equally to the twentieth-century novel I am reading here: "the great multiplot novels dramatize but refuse to resolve the tensions between single and plural, individual and social, particular and general perspectives" (17). A more recent analysis, Vernon Shetley's "Incest and Capital in *Chinatown*" also uses, among others, Empson to sketch a more complex relation between that film's civic and sexual plots. Shetley writes, in a manner resonant for my analysis of *Burmese Days* here: "Personal and political are fused through the mirror-image plots, so that it is not at all clear in which direction causality runs" (1105). Both studies suggest the continuing relevance of a narratological perspective for a nuanced analysis of modern political ideology.

tavern to court “gives an impression of dealing with life completely, so that critics sometimes say that *Henry IV* deals with the whole of English life at some date, either Shakespeare’s or Henry’s” (29-30). Empson is quick to point out that “this is palpable nonsense, but what the device wants to make you feel” (30). One could certainly attempt to construct intermediate double-plot typologies between Middleton, Rowley, and Shakespeare (where the two plots generally relate political heroism to quotidian low-life) and Orwell, noting various historically varying ideological postures, even though such a genealogical gesture would be fraught with simplifications, itself a pastoral version of English literature. Still, there is at least one arguable kind of continuity in double plot structuration, one which comes out most compellingly in Empson’s reading of Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*. Empson notes how that play “compares the sexual with the political standards, and shows both in disruption,” how it “make[s] this comparison between a person and the state, between a personal situation and a political one” (34-35, 42). In *Troilus*, as no less in most Orwell novels, the lowness of the “low” plot emanates from a sexual situation and the highness of the “high” plot is due to its involvement with social and political ideals. The illusion of a complete view of society is a result of the proffered seamlessness of the domestic and the political.

As I have already argued, Empson is keen to note the ideological nature—the “palpable nonsense”—of pastoral’s illusory tricks, machinery, and devices. What he highlights in early modern double plots, I hope to highlight in Orwell’s, chiefly that “queer connections can be insinuated powerfully and unobtrusively” between the domestic-sexual and public-political realms, “especially if [these connections] fit in with ideas the audience already has at the back of its mind” (27). And just as “the interaction of the two plots gives a particularly clear setting for, or machine for imposing, the social and metaphysical ideas on which pastoral depends” in the

early modern period, I will note the device's usefulness for Orwell to explore the social and less recognized metaphysical ideas of twentieth-century liberalism (30). Ultimately, what is most compelling about Empson's lexicon, what no doubt draws de Man to Empson's approach, is that it does not romanticize the cognitive and ideological effects of mistaking a literary formalization for something more real. Instead of glorifying literature for its redemptive or transcendent or synthesizing powers, Empson considers how literature can be more usefully considered as a site for exploring conceptual habits whose potential incoherence goes unremarked in other discursive realms.¹³ Directly on this point Empson says, "the mind is complex and ill-connected like an audience, and it is as surprising in the one case as the other that a sort of unity can be produced by a play" (68). Or, one could add, a novel or a poem. It is such effects of unity produced via highly fractured double plots that feature so prominently in Orwell's novels.

The second theorist of narrative that I will rely on is Mieke Bal. Bal is a self-identified narratologist, who has produced, among other works, a handbook to narratology, an edited collection of essays in narrative theory, and several critical works on visual arts and literature.¹⁴ Her thoughts on narrative structure are thus far more systematically developed than Empson's, but the most interesting feature of her work is still, as opposed to any proffered system per se,

¹³ And like political theorists who draw inspiration from deconstructive insights on rhetoric, Empson does not imagine that there is a rationalist location outside rhetoric from which to fight "bad" ideology. In a comment that resonates strongly with the writings of Ernesto Laclau many decades later on the need for progressives to construct rhetorically effective chains of equivalence, Empson says, when considering the success of a Conservative Party propaganda poster featuring an image of a contented patriotic lower middle class worker of the "Cockney type": "People who consider that the Worker group of sentiments is misleading in contemporary politics tend to use the word 'romantic' as a missile; unless they merely mean 'false' this is quite off the point; what they ought to do is to produce a rival myth, like the [Conservative Party] poster. In calling it mythical I mean that complex feelings, involving all kinds of distant matters, are put into it as a symbol" (16).

¹⁴ My citations from Bal will come from her *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (cited parenthetically as *N*) and three essays. These works share sufficient continuity in their arguments and stances that, for the sake of simplicity in presentation, I will focus on her programmatic statements, divorced from specific argumentative contexts, and only distinguish the texts via parenthetical references.

how impressively it sheds light on certain “surprising” cases. Bal herself emphasizes that the primary value of a system is to promulgate a shared vocabulary that can enable “the possibility of exchange of opinions” in a more precise and productive manner, calling narratological concepts “intellectual tools” that “are useful in that they enable their users to formulate an interpretive description in such a way that it is accessible to others” (N 4). A key aspect of such a system is a basic set of definitions, most centrally “narrative,” which Bal defines as “an account, in any semiotic system, of a subjectivized and often entirely or partly fictionalized series of events. It involves a narrator—whether explicitly or implicitly self-referential, always a ‘first person’—a focalizer—the implied subject who ‘colors’ the story—and a number of actors or agents of the events” (“First” 308). This is not a description of a genre or “a finite set of objects” delimitable on other grounds, and it “is not confined to literary or, indeed, verbal narrative,” but rather it describes “a mode of semiotic behavior,” i.e., more a widespread condition of narrativity, “a cultural attitude” or what I have been calling an ingrained habit of thought, than a fixed category of narrative (“First” 308; N 227). While “narrativity” in this sense is not equivalent to “pastoral,” though it may perhaps be taken as a key pastoral mode, it encourages a similar kind of dismantling of generic and period boundaries (and also disciplinary boundaries less touched by Empson), a move that can lead to less routinized, more precise analysis and interpretation.¹⁵

Bal is quite critical of the pseudo-scientistic tendencies and objectivist pretensions of conventional narratology, what she calls “its positivistic claims, formalist limitations, and inaccessible, idiosyncratic jargon,” all of which have contributed to its failure to significantly

¹⁵ Bal notes, for example, that “there are texts which display all three characteristics [of her narrative schema: fabula, story, and text], but which nevertheless, on the basis of either tradition or intuition, people do not regard as narrative texts. This is true of many poems. *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot is one of the numerous examples” (N 10). That such traditional “intuition” is artificial and distorting is a natural consequence of her thought.

influence literary critical practice (*N* xiv). She is emphatic that the point of narratology is not better typologies, but better comprehension of the narrative aspects of cultural objects, going so far as to claim that “[t]here is no direct logical connection between classifying and understanding texts. And understanding—if taken in a broad sense that encompasses cognitive as well as affective acts, precisely, not distinguished—is the point” (*N* 226). This emphasis on comprehension over categorization subtends her critique of “the conflation of typologies and analytic tools” in classical narratological work, most of which descends, after all, from a taxonomic “morphology” of Russian folk tales. Such narratology fails to fully appreciate that even as a typology has explanatory power based on its consonance with certain aspects of certain texts, it should always be available for revision or dismantling in light of other texts or even a fresher understanding of aspects of those upon which it is based (“Tell” 556). This is not anti-structuralism on Bal’s part, but rather her sense of structuralism’s limitations or place.¹⁶ Indeed, she argues both how “privileging structural analysis over a reflection theory of language [...] help[s] us to reach reality,” and how “[t]he scope of narratology, in my view an indispensable

¹⁶ One interesting place where Bal finds herself defending the importance of structuralism is in the face of critics who want to bypass a supposedly dry narratology to somehow directly engage the affective aspects of stories. Such a concern underwrites her evaluation of Peter Brooks’ notion, in her paraphrase, “that the Freudian theory of drives provides a dynamic model for narrative in that it accounts for both the forward movement and the repeated delaying of the end” (“Tell” 561). Bal points out that while “desire” is a fascinating component of readerly and writerly activities and an undeniable component of the dynamic aspects of narrative fabula, in an application to plots and texts “it is basically a metaphor,” a figurativeness that she does not find Brooks distinguishing clearly and consistently enough, especially in his “weaker moments” where the use of metaphors is “unreflecting and commonplace,” leading to a situation where “metaphors come to hamper rather than stimulate understanding” (“Tell” 557, 561, 559). Thus, even though she lauds Brooks’ goal to challenge conventional narratology’s “too narrow text-centeredness,” she finds that due to his unwillingness to consider the analytic insights of a structuralist narratology that he would heroically overcome, “he has not been able to delimit the semantic range of his concepts. What we thus gain in insight, we may lose in grasp” (“Tell” 562, 563). Indeed, claims such as the following from Brooks’ “Freud’s Masterplot” are interestingly suggestive, but of limited analytical value: “*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* gives an image of how ‘life,’ or the *fabula*, is stimulated into the condition of narrative, becomes *sjuzet*” (296). In saying that one story (Freud’s) is like others (literary narrative fiction), he is offering fewer insights on the nature of storytelling than he imagines.

tool, is a limited one” (“Point” 736; *N x*). Bal’s goal is to make such indispensable analytic tools more widely available and appreciated.

She conceives of her theory of narrative as “a readerly device, a heuristic tool, that provides focus to the expectations with which readers process narrative” (*N xix*). And that usefulness, as her expansive notion of narrativity demands, extends far beyond the literary fictions in which narratology is grounded. Indeed, some of her most interesting results come from applying narratological insights to non-literary and nonfictional texts, and even to non-textual artifacts.¹⁷ With such varied narratively-inflected cultural objects, no less than with literary narrative fictions, narratology’s ability “to position the object within history” via an attention to its structural singularity can provide a fresh perspective on implicit epistemological frameworks and ideological outlooks, chiefly by exploring narrative’s “capacity to map positioned subjects in relation to knowledge,” (“Point” 750; “First” 300).¹⁸ And given the ways that the precision of this perspective “counters interpretations based on prejudice, convention, or ideology” that might have achieved orthodoxy in a given discipline, Bal notes how

¹⁷ Speaking of her interest in narrative dimensions of anthropology, religious texts, and visual objects, Bal describes her wish to “demonstrat[e] the usefulness of narratology to those ‘other things’ being done today” (“Point” 729). Here are two brief examples highlighting the range of her work. Narrative at its most expansive and ambitious: Discussing the discipline’s wish to accurately tell the truth of a whole culture, Bal notes how “anthropology’s self-definition and self-critique are grounded in problems of narrative, for narrative is the stuff of anthropological knowledge” (“Point” 731). Narrative at its most elusive and condensed: Discussing the modern natural sciences’ self-conception as latter-day conquistadores, she notes of Richard Feynman’s statement that “‘anything that is secret, I try to undo’” that it is a metaphor and as such “[n]arrativity comes into play as soon as we realize two things: first, we know that a metaphor represents a view, and that this view has its source in a subject, the speaker/focalizer; second, we know that the very idea of secrecy presupposes an acting subject” (“Point” 738, 739). In both cases, she gives highly nuanced readings of the epistemological and ideological stakes of the respective field’s efforts, supporting her claim that “the process of knowledge construction [...] is narrative in nature on all scores” (“First” 300).

¹⁸ As just one example of this kind of analysis, Bal focuses on how any given narrative persona and attendant focalization positions its audience, its second person or its other, arguing that “[n]arrative, as a structural form and as a discursive posture, presents a unique place to study the intertwinements of these three allegiances” of “the concept of second personhood”: 1) the speaker-as-psychological-subject’s others, 2) the speaker-as-grammatical-subject’s second person, and 3) when referring to humanist knowledge production, the speaker-as-knowledge-producer’s objects of study (“First” 307).

“[p]aradoxically, the very discipline that tends to rigidify its own traditional object is able to de-rigidify other objects,” not least by pointing all those naturalized ideologies not always recognized for the stories they are (“Point” 750, 730).¹⁹

For the readings below, I will employ two specific analytical tools—two lenses on narrative—that Bal has synthesized out of the narratological tradition, and that will help de-rigidify readings of Orwell’s narrative fictions and pastoral imagination. The first of these is an attention to the role of primarily descriptive passages of a text in relation to primarily argumentative (significance-offering) and more purely narrative (story-furthering) ones. Bal now how “[i]f we want to evaluate the ideological tenor of a text, an analysis of the relationship between these three textual forms within the totality of the entire text is a crucial element” (*N* 33-34). Far from seeing descriptive passages as quasi-objective renderings of scene or place, Bal’s various analyses highlight how “something seems to be a contamination that infects ‘pure’ neutral rendering with the taint of narrativity” (“First” 293). Descriptive moments thus need to be analyzed in light of their consonance or dissonance with argumentative and narrative ones, with an appreciation that “the ways in which descriptions are inserted characterize the rhetorical strategy of the narrator” (*N* 41). This form of attention emphasizes that there is no natural

¹⁹ Like Empson, Bal finds of her joint practice of “aesthetic and political criticism [...] that these cannot, or should not, be separated” and speaks of the “connections I have tried to establish between a narratological perspective and ideological issues” throughout her work (*N* x; “Point” 750). In this, her work has resonances with the tradition of relating politics and aesthetics that I discussed in chapter two, exemplified by Rancière, de Man, and Derrida. For example, in discussing how aesthetic ideologies reproduce problematic ideologies of the external world, yet simultaneously provide sites for critically apprehending and critiquing these ideologies, she writes: “Structuring often takes the route of opposition as a handy simplification of complex content. The oppositions we expect to function in fabulas can be traps as well as tools. This is the major problem of ideological and political criticism. The very ideological structure—binary opposition—that we use for our critical readings is simultaneously the object of those readings, their main target. The point is not to notice, confirm, or denounce oppositions but to confront the oppositions we notice with those we hold ourselves, and to use the differences between them as a tool to break their tyranny. With such an approach criticism need not prejudge the politics of great literature, or of popular culture, as happens so often. Instead, it helps to realize that criticism is always also, to a certain extent, self-criticism” (*N* 222).

beginning or necessary end to a thing's description, and that every chosen beginning and end itself creates a narrative, that every descriptive element we are given and every element we are not given contributes to the narrative's effect. Bal considers this under the category of motivation, writing that "[m]otivation is a way of making the relationship between elements explicit. Precisely because these relationships are not self-evident in fictional texts, they can never be motivated enough. And, for this reason, motivation is, in the final analysis, arbitrary" (*N* 45-46). While there are a variety of ways that a narrative can motivate a description, Bal maintains that "[t]he most effective, the most frequent, and the least noticeable form is motivation via looking" (*N* 42). Such visually-motivated description will be central for the reading of *Burmese Days* and subsequent Orwell novels.

The second structural aspect of narrative that Bal brings clearly into focus is the function of narrative spaces and fabular places. In the underlying fabula of a story, no matter how complete a world might be suggested, there will always be only a finite number of places in which events happen, necessitating attention to how "location may function as an important principle of structure." Implicit and explicit alignments and oppositions between these places encourage a particular understanding of that more complete world in the ways that such topographic oppositions "can be related to psychological, ideological, and moral oppositions" (*N* 221). In considering these Bal emphasizes how these "[o]ppositions are constructions" and that "it is important not to forget that and 'naturalize' them" (*N* 222). Similarly, in considering how these fabular places are focalized as narrative spaces, careful consideration needs to be paid to "the operations of arrangement and qualification," the ways that "places are linked to certain points of perception," whether a character's or not (*N* 136). Just as with places, spaces accrue significance by virtue of their place in the overall narrative, sometimes taking on an importance

equal to that of the fabular material and “becom[ing] an acting place rather than the place of action,” so that “[t]he fact that ‘this is happening here’ is just as important as ‘the way it is here’” (N 139). As with description, such attention to place and space will assist the readings of Orwell’s novel, a key feature of which is the mapping of places, whose spatial presentation as privileged by virtue of “how it is there” carries a significant ideological charge.

Double plots, description, place, and space thus provide the limited narratological repertoire that will be used in the discussion of Orwell’s novels below. All four of these concepts denaturalize narrative illusions of realism or naturalism, the idea that the novel faithfully reproduces the texture of a whole world, and they instead draw attention to how such effects are generated via the selection and juxtaposition of the finite elements that comprise the narrative world. Given this limited repertoire, I will not be pursuing this analysis at the level of completeness and complexity made possible by Bal’s full complement of analytical tools.²⁰ However, she herself emphasizes that one of the chief ways to make narratology useful is to

²⁰ An expanded analysis attempting to account for a fuller range of the features of Orwell’s fictions, would want to expand this narratological repertoire in two ways: 1. Include a sustained attention to differences in narrative focalization and narratorial persona, a key focus of Bal’s, in the two plots. 2. Include concepts that help to account for narrative effects related to human agency and psychological and social change, relying on concepts by critics such as Lubomír Doležel and Tzvetan Todorov. Doležel in “Possible Worlds of Fiction and History” offers sustained attention to fictional worlds as “sovereign realms of possibilia” situated “at a closer or further distance from reality”; these worlds allow consideration of, among other things, experimental models of historical causality (788). Doležel’s concepts are grounded in the useful axiom that “[i]f human history is a complex concatenation of personal and social acting carried out by numerous agents, then its course might have been different at any moment of the past,” further noting that “[i]t is, I believe, the contingency of history which makes all predictions about its future course very risky” (800; 800n70). In “Structural Analysis of Narrative,” Todorov also focuses on narrative fictions as models of historical social change, writing that “[t]he minimal complete plot can be seen as the shift from one equilibrium to another. This term ‘equilibrium’ [...] means the existence of a stable but not static relation between the members of a society” (75). Along the same lines, he emphasizes in “The 2 Principles of Narrative” that “it is not true that the only relationship between the units [of a narrative] is one of *succession*; we can say that the relationship of the units must also be one of *transformation*” (39). Todorov classifies these transformations as of external states (“mythological”), of understanding (“gnoseological”), or illustrative of an underlying social logic (“ideological”) (40, 42). There is, of course, much more to say about how such fictional effects of transformation reflect and condition thinking about mechanisms of social and political change in the larger world.

allow relevant analytical tools to emerge from a determination of “which factors are at stake in a narrative situation” and not by committing to the generation of full-fledged typological characterizations (“Tell” 556). And even in her own practical criticism, she notes that “the analyst can only point at a few exemplary features and details, not be comprehensive at all” (“First” 308). So I will not be comprehensive, but make a case for how much is at stake for an understanding of Orwell’s aesthetics and politics in his use of double plots and his descriptions of quasi-pastoral natural spaces.

Some Versions of Double Plot in *Burmese Days*

The name of *Burmese Days*’ protagonist, John Flory, itself seems to indicate the pastoral frame of mind in which we are to understand his actions and concerns. “Flory” is both mildly suggestive of the Latinate naming conventions of prototypical early modern pastorals and, more arguably, indicates even to the novel’s modern Anglophone audience an identification between the chief character and flowers or plant life in general. While claims based on the significance of character names are of questionable value, flora turns out to be not an incidental aspect of the narrative scenery of *Burmese Days* (and of Orwell’s imaginary in general).²¹ This scenic, floral aspect of the novel is not regularly given sufficient weight by its readers, who gravitate towards

²¹ Orwell is generally very precise with his descriptions of plants (and birds). For example, in his description of the club garden at the opening of the novel: “In the borders beside the path swathes of English flowers, phlox and larkspur, hollyhock and petunia, not yet slain by the sun, rioted in vast size and richness. The petunias were huge, like trees almost” (19). And then later: “The *mali* was at work grubbing up the English flowers, most of which had died, slain by too much sunshine, and planting balsams, cockscombs, and more zinnias” (220). Of his three later novels of the 1930s, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) has a flowering plant as its central metaphor for the compromises of middle class British life and the other two, among other floral references, feature prominent scenes in which the protagonist stops to admire flowers: Dorothy Hare in *A Clergyman’s Daughter* (1935) catches sight of a wild rose plant, which she suspects is sweetbriar, and has a quasi-mystical reverie from the scent of nearby fennel fronds and George Bowling in *Coming up for Air* (1939) is equally inspired by his invigorating experience of a roadside patch of primroses, the encounter with which motivates the chief action of the novel, his return to his hometown of Lower Binfield.

the explicitly political features of Orwell's fictions, not surprisingly perhaps given his self-cultivated and now long-established reputation as a "political writer."²² In order, then, to establish a groundwork for a more complex analysis of Orwell's pastoral imagination, one that gives adequate weight to the non-explicitly political aspects of the novel, the analysis here begins with a brief description of the novel's actual double-plot narrative structure, one consisting of a political plot and a romantic plot, each coequal with and inextricable from the other.²³ While it is inevitable that most characters, locales, and events relate to both plots in some way, the division has great heuristic value in assessing the effects of the novel.

Most accounts of *Burmese Days* are centered on a political plot that plays out from April to June 1926 in a remote outpost of the British Empire, the fictional town of Kyauktada in Upper Burma. Given this focus, these accounts quite reasonably take nationalist struggles against imperialism and British attitudes towards these struggles as the most relevant context for the novel's events. In this view the novel is centered on the ethical dilemma of an individual, John Flory, an English timber merchant residing in town and managing a timber operation in the nearby forest. Flory has been in Burma for 15 years and has found, particularly since the war,

²² Along with the now common associations of the term "Orwellian" with political authoritarianism of all stripes, another indication of this reputation is the recently instituted Orwell Prize, which according to its website awards achievement in the nebulous category of "political writing," or in an expanded definition recognizes "the work—the book, the journalism and (since 2009) the blog—which comes closest to George Orwell's ambition 'to make political writing into an art'" ("About").

²³ I note here two essays that do appreciate the importance of sexual relations to the political outcomes of *Burmese Days*, but simplify the complexity of these relations by unwarrantedly considering the novel's characterizations as confined to stock (quasi-Victorian) gender roles. Alan Blackstock in "Beyond the Pale: Women, Cultural Contagion, and Narrative Hysteria in Kipling, Orwell, and Forster" argues for the "consistent scapegoating of the *memsahib*" in the novel's political vision, even though in no obvious way is Elizabeth herself blamed for the disasters that flow from Flory's misapprehensions of or investments in her (184). The novel even allows for a large amount of sympathy towards the difficulty of her situation. Praseeda Gopinath in "An Orphaned Manliness: The Pukka Sahib and the End of Empire in *A Passage to India* and *Burmese Days*" argues that "Flory's tortured passivity is a product of his confusion regarding gentlemanliness itself that both structures, and is usurped by, the caricature of the pukka Sahib" (217). However, "gentlemanliness" (or "imperial manliness" or "public school manliness") is not a very precise descriptor for either Flory's imaginary or actual social-ethical dispositions.

that “each year had been lonelier and more bitter than the last,” poisoned by his “ever bitterer hatred of the atmosphere of imperialism in which he lived” (68). Given his sincere appreciation of Burmese culture and people and given his hatred of “the lie that we’re here to uplift our poor black brothers instead of to rob them,” Flory is isolated from his local compatriots, a very small group of civil, military, and commercial imperial servants who exhibit a generally orthodox range of thinking on racial and cultural matters and who congregate at the European Club, one interchangeable with many similar “Kipling-haunted little Clubs” that dot the Empire (39, 69). Flory, as we encounter him at the beginning of the novel, has “each year [...] found himself less at home in the world of the sahibs, more liable to get into trouble when he talked seriously on any subject whatever. So he had learned to live inwardly, secretly, in books and secret thoughts that could not be uttered” (70).

The chief conflict of the political plot emerges from mostly unwelcome pressure from higher authorities to admit a native member into the club as a concession to increasing anti-imperial sentiment by the Burmese.²⁴ The almost pathologically diffident Flory—“And oh, how he loathed a row! The nagging, the jeers! At the very thought of it he flinched” (63)—must decide whether to risk alienating the other members (particularly the virulently racist and

²⁴ The general background for this specific political contestation is emergent Burmese discontent over British rule, as well as political discontent in British India at large (of which Burma was one administrative unit). One of the few historically concrete references is to an incident in which a gathering of unarmed civilians was fired upon in Amritsar, Punjab, an action authorized by General Reginald Dyer, who was subsequently forced to resign. Ellis says: “Look at Amritsar. Look how they caved in after that. Dyer knew the stuff to give them. Poor old Dyer! That was a dirty job. Those cowards in England have got something to answer for” (32). *Burmese Days* features two native rebellions, a doomed one that happens off-stage, orchestrated by U Po Kyin to secure his own pro-British credentials, and a later spontaneous uprising following Ellis’s attack on a Burmese child, which is a key event in the story. This latter attack on the European Club, in which a frightened Elizabeth spurs Flory to heroic action, carries many echoes of the conventional British rhetoric of the Indian “mutiny” of 1857, which characterized the threat as most damagingly to the sexual virtue of white women. Such attitudes are also hinted at earlier by Mrs. Lackersteen, to whose “mind the words ‘sedition’, ‘Nationalism’, ‘rebellion’, ‘Home Rule’, conveyed one thing and one only, and that was a picture of herself being raped by a procession of jet-black coolies with rolling white eyeballs” (137-138).

bullying Ellis, an assistant at another timber firm) by sponsoring his Indian friend Dr. Veraswami, who is both the town's Civil Surgeon and the superintendent of the local jail, and surprisingly a firm believer in the British civilizing mission. Entry to the club would save the doctor from the intrigues of the other aspiring candidate, the corrupt and scheming Burmese Sub-divisional Magistrate U Po Kyin who seeks to further his prestige by joining what his more traditional wife imagines as "[t]he European Club, that remote, mysterious temple, that holy of holies far harder of entry than Nirvana!" (143). Flory ultimately does propose Dr. Veraswami, under conditions I will discuss later, though due to an Englishman's murder and a riot sparked by Ellis' physical attack on a Burmese schoolboy the decisive vote is never completed and, for reasons I will discuss later, Flory commits suicide before the club membership issue is returned to. In the final chapter, which summarizes events after Flory's death, we learn that U Po Kyin is ultimately admitted and no improvement is made in the social or political situation of Kyauktada and no change is made in the worldviews of any of the other characters, Burmese, Indian, or English, even as their fortunes alter (U Po Kyin's for the better; Dr. Veraswami's for the worse).

The chief places of the political plot are the decidedly unglamorous English club whose exclusivity is so greatly prized, yet in which the English Flory is often marginalized and silent, and the residences of the two native aspirants, U Po Kyin and Dr. Veraswami. The narrator's description of the club's dilapidated rooms very clearly expresses the festering of the British role in Burma and the meanness of the stakes in the political contest between U Po Kyin and Dr. Veraswami:

Inside, the Club was a teak-walled place smelling of earth-oil, and consisting of only four rooms, one of which contained a forlorn 'library' of five hundred mildewed novels, and another an old and mangy billiard-table—this, however, seldom used, for during most of

the year hordes of flying beetles came buzzing round the lamps and littered themselves over the cloth. There were also a card-room and a 'lounge' which looked towards the river, over a wide veranda; but at this time of day all the verandas were curtained with green bamboo chinks. The lounge was an unhomelike room, with coconut matting on the floor, and wicker chairs and tables which were littered with shiny illustrated papers. For ornament there were a number of 'Bonzo' pictures, and the dusty skulls of sambhur. A punkah, lazily flapping, shook dust into the tepid air. (20)

The descriptions of the native aspirants' homes disclose a no less critical attitude towards their outlooks. Just as the plot indicates the danger of incompletely Westernized Asians, U Po Kyin's living room indicates the vulgarity of such a hybrid:²⁵ "it was dark and sluttish as all Burmese rooms are, though U Po Kyin had furnished it 'Ingaleik fashion' with a veneered sideboard and chairs, some lithographs of the Royal Family and a fire-extinguisher. The floor was covered with bamboo mats, much splashed by lime and betel juice" (14). There is similarly failed mimicry by Dr. Veraswami. His house has an "unkempt garden" that abuts the club's garden. Given the constant work on the club's garden by its mali (the native gardener, on whom more later) and Flory's intense attention to flowers, this observation is a not insignificant condemnation of Dr. Veraswami as an Englishman manqué, a judgment emphasized by the absurdity of his more-

²⁵ This portrayal strongly draws, in a not entirely parodic mode, on the same representational tradition as Sax Rohmer's villainous Fu-Manchu, another Westernized Asian who turns the educational and cultural "gifts" of Empire against the imperialists because of his innate Oriental degeneracy. Like Fu Manchu, who "is a linguist who speaks with almost equal facility in any of the civilized languages, and in most of the barbaric," the Anglophone imperial servant U Po Kyin is "cunning" yet "barbaric" (24). Whereas Fu-Manchu is fearsome, U Po Kyin is oftentimes comical, for example when he tells his wife that he is "*Agent provocateur*—Latin, you would not understand. I am *agent provocateur*" (139). Christopher Hitchens also notes "the Fu Manchu cliché" (179). There is, in fact, no positively-depicted significant Burmese character in the novel, only a seemingly industrious Chinese shopkeeper and an Indian doctor with integrity. The description of the doctor who treats the boy attacked by Ellis is characteristic: "In the evening the wounded boy was taken to a Burmese doctor, who, by applying some poisonous concoction of crushed leaves to his left eye, succeeded in blinding him" (244).

English-than-the-English pro-imperialism and the simultaneous accenting of his speech in the text, the only character so treated. For example, Dr. Veraswami is “agitated” by Flory’s attack on the British, replying: “But truly, truly, Mr. Flory, you must not speak so! Why iss it that always you are abusing the pukka sahibs, ass you call them? They are the salt of the earth” (38).

If the novel consisted solely of this political plot, we would receive a fair view of empire from the perspective of the radical socialist Orwell railing against the degradations inflicted by it upon both the natives and the English. In large part this plot dramatizes a conflict between Flory’s worldview and various competing ideological perspectives on the British Empire (and by extension British society) by his neighbors, native and European. So just as Ellis represents a brutal form of Cockney racism, as when he refers to Dr. Veraswami as “that little nigger Very-slimy” and Flory as a “nigger’s Nancy Boy,” Mrs. Lackersteen (the wife of another timber firm’s local manager) is clearly a mouthpiece for a more striving middle-class superiority and snobbery in her conventionally English matronly horror of all things unorthodox, as when she exclaims of Flory (in her best Lady Bracknell²⁶), “‘Really! You know, I always thought he had such *curious* ideas. What has he been talking about now? Not *Socialism*, I hope?’” (190, 191, 199). Through these and other characters, like the vain cruel aristocrat Lt. Verrall, the political plot gives occasion to encounter a wide range of British and native class positions and a correspondingly wide degree of pro-imperialist attitudes are arrayed against Flory as a test of his integrity and bravery. I do not offer a complete chart of this ideological terrain, but simply note that through Flory’s experience the reader can create one and thereby assess one view of the ideological sources, discursive work, and social-political impact of colonialism.

²⁶ Or perhaps she is more like Hyacinth Bucket, as when the narrator notes that upon anticipation of the aristocratic Lt. Verrall’s arrival “Mrs. Lackersteen had begun talking in an extraordinary silly manner about the dear Prince of Wales, and putting on an accent like a temporarily promoted chorus-girl playing the part of a duchess in a musical comedy” (192).

Very little of this matters for the other plot, which could just as easily have played out in England. While the romance plot equally centers on Flory's isolation over the same timespan, it instead focuses on his loneliness as a sensitive soul alive to the simple pleasures of nature and rustic life, but with no equally attuned partner to share them:

There was, he saw clearly, only one way out. To find someone who would share his life in Burma—but really share it, share his inner, secret life, carry away from Burma the same memories as he carried. Someone who would love Burma as he loved it and hate it as he hated it. Who would help him to live with nothing hidden, nothing unexpressed. Someone who understood him: a friend, that was what it came down to.

A friend. Or a wife? That quite impossible she. (72)

Despite the reference to his current location, the quasi-existentialist romantic-spiritual angst expressed here has no necessary tie to the society or politics of Burma. A potential end to Flory's "pain of exile" is heralded by the arrival of Elizabeth Lackersteen, an Englishwoman with whom he quickly develops a total obsession (179). Elizabeth, we learn, is attempting to rescue herself from her penury as an orphan and return to her very narrow sense of a respectable class position of the kind she briefly inhabited when her father, a tea merchant, had been successful immediately after World War I, allowing her to attend for two terms "a very expensive boarding-school," one also attended by children of the aristocracy and other girls of the pony-owning classes. The narrator states that it was during "those two terms during which she rubbed shoulders with the rich" that her character was "fixed forever" (90). Her father died of influenza in 1919 and, before her appearance in the novel, she had been living in Paris for two years with her mother, a failed bohemian painter who dies of "ptomaine poisoning" (95). In Kyauktada, Elizabeth finds herself taken in begrudgingly by her harridan aunt (the aforementioned Mrs.

Lackersteen) and dissipated uncle, the aunt relentlessly pressuring her to settle for any viable husband (presumptively Flory at first), the uncle sexually harassing her the meanwhile.

In the chief dilemma of this romance plot, the middle-aged bachelor Flory, burdened with “a hideous birthmark stretching in a ragged crescent down his left cheek, from the eye to the corner of the mouth,” needs to convince the conventionally racist and unusually provincial Elizabeth to marry him (17). For despite the incompatibility of their worldviews, her ineffable feminine appeal makes her an ideal companion to him beyond any ability of her noxious personality to tarnish. For her part, she comes to feel that “there had always been something dubious about Flory; his age, his birthmark, his queer, perverse way of talking—that ‘highbrow’ talk that was at once unintelligible and disquieting” (175-176). After a very brief courtship, Elizabeth rejects Flory in favor of a new arrival to Kyauktada, the aforementioned Lt. Verrall, an arrogant “youngest son of a peer” (201), not least because her aunt redirects her towards the aristocratic Verrall and sabotages an imminent marriage proposal from Flory by opportunistically informing Elizabeth of Flory’s Burmese mistress, Ma Hla May, whose existence Mrs. Lackersteen had intentionally hidden up to that point (195). When Lt. Verrall eventually departs unannounced, deserting Elizabeth after insincerely going through the motions of a courtship, Elizabeth returns to Flory, especially as he redeems himself by means which I will discuss below, only to reject him a second time, this time seemingly definitively, for reasons I will also discuss below. Flory then kills his dog Flo and himself. In the final chapter we learn that Elizabeth, out of a lack of any better option, ends up marrying the older Mr. Macgregor, the kindly but long-winded Deputy Commissioner who presides over the club.

The chief places of the romance plot are those where Flory’s (and for a while Lt. Verrall’s) courtship of Elizabeth are carried out and highlight the two chief facets of her

personality. First, there is the jungle in which Elizabeth blossoms in her guise of imperial adventuress. So when Flory is discussing strategy during a hunt, “Elizabeth wriggled her shoulder-blades against the chair. It was a movement that she made sometimes when she was deeply pleased. She loved Flory, really loved him,” because the “most trivial scrap of information about shooting thrilled her. If only he would always talk about shooting, instead of books and Art and that mucky poetry! In a sudden burst of admiration she decided that Flory was really quite a handsome man, in his way” (161). This affection becomes outright erotic when Elizabeth herself shoots an imperial pigeon: once in her hands, “[s]he could hardly give it up, the feel of it so ravished her. She could have kissed it, hugged it to her breast. [...] She was conscious of an extraordinary desire to fling her arms round Flory’s neck and kiss him” (167). Similarly when dressed for rides into the jungle with Lt. Verrall, the narrator emphasizes that “[s]he looked ravishing in jodhpurs, simply ravishing!” (211). Against the Elizabeth of the jungle, there is the censorious Elizabeth of the Burmese market and town, acting out her role of imperial memsahib. At a traditional *pwe* performance, “Elizabeth watched the dance with a mixture of amazement, boredom and something approaching horror,” worrying that “[s]urely it was not right to be sitting among the black people like this, almost touching them, in the scent of their garlic and their sweat?” (104, 105). And subsequently in a Chinese grocer’s house, Elizabeth again worries about the propriety of her presence—“ought we to be sitting down in these people’s house? Isn’t it sort of—sort of *infra dig*?”—and sums up her experience with “What absolutely *disgusting* people!” (130, 132). In both cases, Elizabeth abruptly and rudely leaves when viscerally offended, at the *pwe* performance by the buttock movements of a female dancer and at the shop by a baby that urinates on the floor.

In this courtship, we are provided a view of the world from the perspective of the English liberal Orwell: corrupt civilizational spaces are shunned in favor of natural or rustic ones. Even in Burma, the ultimate horizon of happiness is an uncorrupted, financially autonomous, heterosexual domesticity in the English countryside. Here are the terms in which Flory imagines an ideal outcome for his life:

He would live a year in civilised society, he would find some girl who did not mind his birthmark—a civilised girl, not a pukka memsahib—and he would marry her and endure ten, fifteen more years of Burma. Then they would retire—he would be worth twelve or fifteen thousand pounds on retirement, perhaps. They would buy a cottage in the country, surround themselves with friends, books, their children, animals. They would be free for ever of the smell of pukka sahibdom. He would forget Burma, the horrible country that had come near ruining him. (70-71)

It is noteworthy that the phrase “in the country” does not need specifying as to in which country “the country” is to be found. In any case, the unity and consistency of Flory’s rustic vision here is challenged in the novel by Elizabeth who is for him a central component of its success, yet paradoxically despite her quintessential Englishness and seemingly perfect fit is unable to be integrated into it. As with the political plot, through Flory’s experience the reader can map another ideological terrain, here obtaining a clearer view of the ideological sources, discursive work, and social-psychological impact of the liberal romantic-domestic imagination, a kind of ideological insight less often accredited to Orwell’s fictions, and one which I will explore in greater detail below.

“Queer Connections”: Sex and Politics in *Burmese Days*

To provide a more precise view of the ideological implications of *Burmese Days*, I want to here very briefly outline the kinds of interference that the unfolding of the romance plot creates for the unfolding of the political one, then discuss this interference’s significance in light of the changing descriptions of Flory’s pastoral ideal, before finally providing a discussion of the political and aesthetic ideologies that can properly be ascribed to *Burmese Days*.

The first five chapters, of twenty-five total, cover the course of one day, during which the general context of the political situation in Kyauktada and the specific club membership issue, along with all of the key players in the political plot, are introduced. During this day, Dr. Veraswami warns Flory of U Po Kyin’s scheming against both of them. Chapter six begins on the morning of the second day, during which an anonymous letter attacking Dr. Veraswami (part of a barrage of libel arranged by U Po Kyin the previous day) arrives for Flory. Despite Flory’s earlier realization that “the doctor, after all, was his friend, indeed, almost the sole friend he had in Burma” and his current realization that “[t]he obvious, the decent course was to give the letter to Dr. Veraswami and let him take what action he chose,” Flory demurs (47, 79). He justifies his unwillingness to intervene in the intrigue or align himself publically with the doctor via cynical reference to how “[i]t is so important (perhaps the most important of all the Ten Precepts of the pukka sahib) not to entangle oneself in ‘native’ quarrels,” since “[e]ven to know the rights and wrongs of a ‘native’ quarrel is a loss of prestige” (78, 79). In thus self-consciously capitulating to the code of the detested pukka sahibs, especially given the “very slight, very nebulous” risk to himself, Flory does not delude himself as to his cravenness (79).

At this first crucial juncture in the political plot, then, the protagonist disavows his agency, an unpromising start to the narrative. But fortuitously at the very moment “[h]e carefully

t[ears] the letter into small pieces and thr[ows] them over the gate” absolving himself of responsibility to Dr. Veraswami, he hears “a terrified scream [...] from the jungle behind the house, [...] an English voice, a woman’s, crying out in terror” (79). Just as Dr. Veraswami leaves his field of conscious concern, Elizabeth enters it. During the process of extricating her from the attention of a harmless water buffalo that has cornered her, “[h]e became conscious of the soft, youthful body pressed against his own, and the warmth breathing out of it; whereat something seemed to thaw and grow warm within him” (80). This igniting of internal heat marks the beginning of Flory’s immediate infatuation and courtship of her. Accordingly, for almost all of chapters six through eleven, the romance plot takes center stage, with only a passing reference in chapter nine to the fact that “[t]he feud between U Po Kyin and Dr. Veraswami was now in full swing” (111). Chapter twelve, one in which Flory does not feature, is devoted to disclosing U Po Kyin’s further scheming.

In chapter thirteen there is another crucial crossing of the two plots. Before Elizabeth’s arrival, Flory had thought of his “stifling, stultifying world” as one “in which every word and every thought is censored” and “[f]ree speech is unthinkable,” where the pukka sahib are “tied together [...] by an unbreakable system of tabus,” unlike in England where “it is hard even to imagine such an atmosphere” (69). A fortnight or so of Elizabeth’s company, however, catalyzes a change in Flory’s sense of his agency in Kyauktadan politics and almost unconsciously reinvigorates his commitment to core “English” values. During his next conversation with Dr. Veraswami “[a] thought came into his head, an uncomfortable, chilling thought which would never have occurred to him three weeks earlier. It was one of those moments when one sees quite clearly what is one’s duty, and, with all the will in the world to shirk it, feels certain that one

must carry it out” (149). Namely, he decides that “[h]e was definitely committed now to proposing the doctor’s election” (151). This is how he explains his change of course:

It was because Elizabeth, by coming into his life, had so changed it and renewed it that all the dirty, miserable years might never have passed. Her presence had changed the whole orbit of his mind. She had brought back to him the air of England—dear England, where thought is free and one is not condemned forever to dance the *danse du pukka sahib* for the edification of the lower races. Where is the life that late I led? (151).²⁷

Strangely, the racist—yet ineffably and quintessentially English—Elizabeth (a woman who feels of Burmans, “How *revoltingly* ugly these people are, aren’t they?”) ultimately energizes Flory’s rebellion against the racist status quo of the English club (118).

At this point sixty percent into the novel both of Flory’s plots seem to be headed towards satisfyingly positive resolutions: he will take the minimal risk to guarantee Dr. Veraswami’s election to the club, thus insulating him from U Po Kyin’s attacks, and given her limited options Elizabeth is bound to accept Flory’s marriage proposal, especially after his demonstration of his manliness during their hunt in the next chapter. The novel could end here, implicitly promoting a simplistic liberal humanist creed about the redemptive power of personal relationships and romantic love in arming one to face and eventually ameliorating political and social ills. Of course the novel does not so end. In chapter fifteen Flory’s proposal is interrupted by (of all the unlikely narrative devices) an earthquake, and in the last ten chapters Lt. Verrall arrives, Mrs. Lackersteen interferes, Elizabeth rejects Flory, who is driven to despair. In a final crossing of the political and romantic situations, Flory is spurred by love for Elizabeth to his heroic, non-violent

²⁷ The citation in the last line here of Petruchio’s ballad from Act 4, Scene 1 of William Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* is yet another indication of how Flory’s imagination is rooted in some version of an idealized pastoral world of early modern England. Another indication is his infatuation with not just Elizabeth’s English beauty but her very Elizabethan name: “Elizabeth—lovely name, too rare nowadays. He hoped she spelt it with a Z” (88).

actions in suppressing the native uprising protesting Ellis's attack on a Burmese boy. Even though Flory "always found it difficult to believe that Orientals could be really dangerous," feeling "Elizabeth's hand on his arm" alerts him to "the seriousness of the situation" (249). When he suggests his plan to swim the river to circumvent the protestors blocking the club's front entrance, the alienated "Elizabeth squeezed his arm and actually danced a step or two in glee" (250). Following the successful suppression of the uprising and later Lt. Verrall's abscondment, Flory and Elizabeth's engagement is seemingly settled for a second time—"Hell was yielding up Euridice" he feels—only to be finally undone by U Po Kyin's coaching of Ma Hla May to disrupt a church service and publically humiliate Flory, driving Elizabeth to tell him that "I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth" (271, 277). Upon this rejection, Flory commits suicide, finding that what had been endurable in Burma before "was not endurable any longer," leaving his plans to assist Dr. Veraswami's entry to the club unconsidered and unfinished (279).

The suicide is an interpretative crux, raising the questions of why and how "Elizabeth's coming" initially reignites and ultimately extinguishes "the power to suffer and above all to hope" in Flory (279). Answering these questions requires examining the insistent intertwining of sexual and political concerns throughout the novel. The explicit suggestion that somehow the solution to the dilemmas of imperialism for Flory (and perhaps for England in general) lies in a moral power released by the influence of attractive English women, is a perfect illustration of those "queer connections" that Empson credits double plots with so successfully insinuating. To explore these connections in the plots, ones that paradoxically condition agency in political contestations to outcomes in the romantic arena, it is worthwhile for the reader to shift attention from the obviously political discursive-ideological contestations of the club (easy enough to

assess and often enough critically considered) to Flory's experience and description of the putatively non-political retreats in the jungle (less often taken as a source of critical interest), a site for his reveries on the life he wishes to lead with his love interest.

During the first day of the plot, that is before Elizabeth's arrival, Flory takes a walk into the jungle alone. His path two miles into the jungle

le[ads] to a pool fifty yards up-stream. Here a peepul tree grew, a great buttressed thing six feet thick, woven of innumerable strands of wood, like a wooden cable twisted by a giant. The roots of the tree made a natural cavern, under which the clear greenish water bubbled. Above and all round dense foliage shut out the light, turning the place into a green grotto walled with leaves. (56-57)

It requires no conceptual adventurousness to bring in the notion of pastoral to account for this turning of the wild shapelessness of a jungle into a "green grotto walled with leaves," one constructed by an imaginary anthropomorphic labor ("like a wooden cable twisted by a giant") and suited to human aesthetic standards of the picturesque and retiring.²⁸ Using Bal's terminology, we could say that the fabular place of the jungle is transmuted into a simplified pastoral space via Flory's homogenization of the jungle's greenness and concomitant exclusion of, or inattention to, any potentially unscenic details. This spatial scene is decorated with a "flock of green pigeons" that blend imperceptibly into the "great green dome of the tree" (57). It is useful to mention here Empson's note (in speaking of Andrew Marvell's oeuvre) that the color

²⁸ Raymond Williams in his chapter on "The City and the Future" in *The Country and the City* notes this aspect of Orwell's imagination but assigns it for some reason only to his later works: "In his deep disillusion with the development of socialism, he returned, in his later work, as in *Coming up for Air* (1939) to a vision of the country, the old unspoiled country, as a place of human retreat and rest, an innocence which the new civilisation, capitalist or socialist, was aggressively destroying" (275). And in the chapter on "The New Metropolis" he ties this tendency towards the nostalgia of the imperial exile: "But many [of these images of England as 'home'] are of an idea of rural England: its green peace contrasted with the tropical or arid places of actual work; its sense of belonging, of community, idealised by contrast with the tensions of colonial rule and the isolated alien settlement" (281).

“green” carries a range of associations in a particular strand of the English literary imagination: “grass, buds, children, an as yet virginal prospect of sexuality, and the peasant stock from which the great families emerge” (127).²⁹ Flory’s thought alike associates greenness with rustic domesticity and sexuality, as when the “bubbling noise” of “the clear greenish water” sounds to Flory “like pots boiling” (in a hearth?) and the beauty of the scene generates a “pang,” a fervent wish that “there had been a soul with whom to share it. Beauty is meaningless until it is shared” (57). Occurring so early in the novel, and as perhaps the only time Flory is shown “happy and at peace,” the “green grotto” scene establishes his sense of an ideal relation of individual to the world (58).³⁰ Later returns to such a scene will attempt to incorporate Elizabeth into the idyll.

On a superficial reading, one which Flory affirms, Elizabeth proves a perfect companion to him in Arcadia. At their very first meeting, leaving the water buffaloes behind, they “stopped with one consent, to look at the flowers,” Elizabeth establishing that she “‘adored’ flowers” and

²⁹ There is, in fact, a sustained echo of the almost prototypical “green shade” of Marvell’s “The Garden” in the “green grotto” scene in *Burmese Days*. Just as in Marvell’s poem, Flory’s mind, in imagining a domed green grotto that allows him to block out the cares of the external world, “creates [...] Far other worlds, [...] / Annihilating all that’s made / To a green thought in a green shade.” So too his “Soul into the boughs does glide” and concretize itself “There like a Bird” which “sits, and sings.” That is, to return to the language of the novel, Flory sees that “a single green pigeon fluttered down and perched on a lower branch,” noting of this quasi-celestial visitor that “[o]ne does not often see green pigeons so closely when they are alive. They are high-flying birds, living in the treetops, and they do not come to the ground, or only to drink” (57, 58). The further connections between pastoral idyll and sexual pursuit are also obviously relevant, as in Marvell’s comment that no color is as “am’rous as this lovely green” driving “Fond lovers” to “Cut in these trees their mistress’ name.” Such a focus on the discursive history of greenness would have well served Michael Clune in “Orwell and the Obvious,” one of the few recent attempts to say something sophisticated about an Orwell novel. Unfortunately, Clune impresses *1984* for a questionable argument that grounds itself in a supposedly “neutral description of the neurobiology of perception,” leading him to consider Orwell’s preference for “the ordinary world where grass is green” in a highly idiosyncratic and positivistic manner (47, 41).

³⁰ Douglas Kerr, in “Colonial Habitats: Orwell and Woolf in the Jungle,” recognizes the importance of this scene in determining Flory’s “weak liberal insights” that make it so that he “can never belong to Burma” (157). Though Kerr’s essay pegs the dynamics of this pastoralism to imperialism, stating that in it the novel briefly “achieves an unantagonistic and even innocent relation between western subject and eastern place,” Orwell’s pastoralism is untied to orientalism, recurring in novels set in the London of Orwell’s present (*Keep the Aspidistra Flying*’s Burnham Beeches) and another in a future London (1984’s “Golden Country”).

Flory asking eagerly “I hope you’re fond of gardening?” (82, 83). Later when they go on the hunt, they penetrate jointly into “the high green wall of the jungle” (164). I have already mentioned the erotic heat that the hunt generates in Elizabeth; it is still worthwhile here to re-emphasize how the success of the hunt consummates their relationship. So, as they admire Elizabeth’s successful shot of a cock:

They were kneeling face to face with the dead bird between them. With a shock they discovered that their hands, his right and her left, were clasped tightly together. They had run to the place hand-in-hand without noticing it.

A sudden stillness came on them both, a sense of something momentous that must happen. Flory reached across and took her other hand. It came yieldingly, willingly. For a moment they knelt with their hands clasped together. The sun blazed upon them and the warmth breathed out of their bodies; they seemed to be floating upon clouds of heat and joy. He took her by the upper arms to draw her towards him. (168).

Thinking he has found a soul-mate with whom to share his idyll, Flory’s earlier solitary content is magnified into a joint “inordinate happiness [...] with which nothing else in life [...] is even able to be compared” (173). Their foray into Arcadia is so successful that “it was understood that Flory would ask Elizabeth to marry him” (174). And the happiness of this pastoral communion is so ineffably unique that after Elizabeth leaves him for Lt. Verrall, his experience of the jungle is radically devalued; “incuriously” looking around the same jungle later he finds that “[e]verything—birds, trees, flowers, everything—was deadly and meaningless because she was not here” (215). This is an unmistakable indication of how much the place of the jungle becomes a screen for ideological projections.³¹

³¹ In “Reading the Rocks, Flora and Fauna: Representations of India in *Kim*, *A Passage to India* and *Burmese Days*,” Jennifer Dawson recognizes that “Orwell [...] seems unwilling—or perhaps unable—to

Indeed, the jungle in the novel, and in Flory's imagination, is not just another place for the action, but very much an "acting place," a background on which Flory's ideals can be projected. That it is very much a projection—i.e., that Orwell is very much working within a pastoral mode and nothing like a naturalism—is particularly noticeable in how, as the novel progresses, the metamorphosis of a bubbling pool into "pots boiling" heralds a full-blown associative transfiguration of the natural scene into a domestic one. That is, a jungle that is already formalized (aestheticized) into something close to a landscaped English countryside or garden, transmutes even further in Flory's imagination into a nostalgic English domestic space. So when he does fantasize, after their initial reconciliation, about their married life together, a key component of his vision is indeed seeing "her walking in the forest with him, watching the hornbills in the peepul trees and picking nameless flowers, and in the marshy grazing-grounds, tramping through the cold-weather mist after snipe and teal." But the jungle now has ceded centrality to his remodeled drawing-room, "sluttish and bachelor-like no longer, with new furniture from Rangoon, and a bowl of pink balsams like rosebuds on the table, and books and water-colours and a black piano—symbol, perhaps because he was unmusical, of civilised and settled life" (272). And when Flory is rejected by Elizabeth for the final time soon after, immediately before his suicide he thinks only of the loss of "their home," "their garden," "the drive," and again "the drawing-room" with the "impossible, mythical piano—symbol of

describe Burma without comparing it to England" (9). Kerr similarly notes that "Orwell's jungle is constantly being tied back [...] to a stock of imagery that is English" (159). These observations bolster a reading of the novel as contesting two visions of England, as much as providing an anti-imperial critique. Flory's liberal pastoral stands in contrast to his liberal capitalist imperial compatriots who demonstrate, as Todd Kuchta notes, in "Suburbia, *Ressentiment*, and the End of Empire in *A Passage to India*," the stereotypical "passion for gardening and dated periodicals [that] consumes colonial society in [Evelyn Waugh's] *Black Mischief* and *Burmese Days*" (312).

everything that that futile accident had wrecked!”³² The jungle does not feature in his “hallucination” at all, except perhaps as the originary source for the domesticated “balsams in the china bowl mirrored by the table” (278).

Now, as Bal would emphasize, these various descriptions and varying uses of the place-made-space of the jungle and the drawing-room have a dynamic relation with the narrative and argumentative aspects of the text and the overall “rhetorical strategy” of the narrator. That is, what Flory rhetorically offers as a natural relay from jungle/grotto to garden/drawing room is problematized by a careful reader’s attention to the description of those distinct spaces. Chiefly, Flory does not acknowledge some highly uncongenial features of the political economy of the English drawing room, as it itself is made into a space via a fragmented visual description of it as a static stage-set for domestic retirement, that make it irreconcilable with the pastoral fantasy of the domed English grotto, itself a problematic account of the wildness of a jungle, especially given the irony that Flory works for a timber operation.³³

The most obvious thing to note is that whereas Flory’s pastoral ideal strives toward an organic wholeness in which green pigeons and green foliage and green water blur into an indistinct quasi-spiritual natural greenness, Elizabeth is more enchanted with the “flight of green pigeons [...] dashing towards them at incredible speed” once they have been reduced during the

³² The final words Flory and Elizabeth exchange are: “‘You should have a piano,’ he said despairingly. / ‘I don’t play the piano.’” (278).

³³ Such blindness vitiates Flory’s passionate critique of suburbia. Another aspect of this pro-countryside, anti-suburban sentiment, which is more pronounced in later novels set in England, is the suspicion of mass media: “‘Where’s it going to lead, this uprush of modern progress, as you call it? Just to our own dear old swinery of gramophones and billycock hats. Sometimes I think that in two hundred years all this—’ he waved a foot towards the horizon—‘all this will be gone—forests, villages, monasteries, pagodas all vanished. And instead, pink villas fifty yards apart; all over those hills, as far as you can see, villa after villa, with all the gramophones playing the same tune. And all the forests shaved flat—chewed into wood-pulp for the *News of the World*, or sawn up into gramophone cases’” (42). We can at least say that Flory was definitively wrong about the survival of the *News of the World*. Kuchta notes that “rather than satisfying the mania to uphold middle-class life in the colonies, the periodicals—and the suburban life they represent—only intensify feelings of nostalgia” (315).

hunt to “little green corpses” to be stored in Flory’s servant’s bag (164, 165). Whereas after shooting them Flory reflects “Aren’t they lovely things? The most beautiful bird in Asia. [...] I always feel it’s a shame to kill them,” Elizabeth “enviously” says of his skill in bringing them down, “I wish I could do it like you do!” (165). Flory does not acknowledge that far from imagining the natural world of the jungle as a balm for the wounds of imperialism (and social-political life in general), Elizabeth displays a typical imperialist’s fixation with the instruments and techniques of dominating this natural world.

This aspect of Elizabeth’s personality is drawn out clearly in her possessive attachment to her gun, “the feel of [which] delighted her so much that she could not bring herself to give it up” and which heightens her “pining for the shooting to begin” (158, 160). Earlier this brutal imperialist domination of nature had already been presaged in her life outside the jungle, one ruled by an almost caricatured internalization of a brutal capitalist instrumentalization of human relations:

[H]er whole code of living was summed up in one belief, and that a simple one. It was that the Good (‘lovely’ was her name for it) is synonymous with the expensive, the elegant, the aristocratic; and the Bad (‘beastly’) is the cheap, the low, the shabby, the laborious. [...] The feeling subtilised itself as Elizabeth grew older, diffused itself through all her thoughts. Everything from a pair of stockings to a human soul was classifiable as ‘lovely’ or ‘beastly.’ (90)

The callousness of this Elizabethan world picture reaches a culmination in the suffering of the hunted leopard, the thought of not encountering once it is heard about producing in Elizabeth a “disappointment [that] was so agonising” and the thought of losing once it is shot at making her

“danc[e] about in agitation” (171, 172).³⁴ The wounded leopard “cr[ies] out with a snarling, sobbing noise, savage and pitiful,” and the dead leopard looks “much smaller than he had looked alive; he looked rather pathetic, like a dead kitten” (172, 173). Again Flory does not acknowledge, as with his own active role in deforestation, this instrumentalization, domination, suffering, and cruelty that is not disguised by the narrative.

Tellingly, after being rejected, Flory turns to the promised gift of the cured leopard skin to bridge the rift with Elizabeth—“[t]he thought of the leopard-skin had filled him with extravagant hopes”—but since it had “been utterly ruined” by untrained prison laborers, Elizabeth greets its “foul odour,” as she greets Flory’s pleas and protestations, only “with a wince of disgust” (216, 217). Flory struggles increasingly with the introduction of disgust, and other antagonistic affects, into his Arcadia during and soon after this encounter. For example, because of his inability to pierce Elizabeth’s protective barrier of banal conversation, he is overcome with the violent wish to “[s]eize her in your arms; make her listen, kick her, beat her—anything sooner than let her choke you with this drivell!” (219). This suppressed violence surfaces in private later, as “[a]t times he flew into savage rages, and once even struck Ko S’la,” his Burmese servant (226). Then, when Elizabeth excuses herself to go riding with Lt. Verrall, he is overcome with a kind of sexual nausea, imagining the couple’s liaison in the jungle “in one of those hallucinations that are so perfect in detail, so vilely obscene, that they are past bearing,” later finding that “[t]he vision of Elizabeth in Verrall’s arms haunted him like a neuralgia or an earache. At any moment it would come upon him, vivid and disgusting” and that “[w]hat was worse than all was the *detail*—the always filthy detail—in which the imagined scene appeared”

³⁴ Dawson (10) and Kerr (156) both comment on Elizabeth’s stereotypical role as the cruel dominator of nature perverting Flory’s somehow more organic connection to flora and fauna. Along these lines, Flory partakes of the common sexist conflation of capitalist rapacity with femininity, as in his speculation that “[p]erhaps it is in order to teach this [lovely/beastly] creed that expensive girls’ schools exist” (90).

(221-222, 226). Obscenity, filth, disgust, and all the associated feelings of sexual shame and anxiety that had previously only been associated with his Burmese mistresses—with whom he felt “[h]e had dirtied himself beyond redemption”—come to taint his supposedly spiritual love for Elizabeth, for whom now “he was tormented by the basest physical longing” (196, 226). While he does finally come to some kind of realization of who she is, claiming that “[h]e did not even idealise her any longer. He saw her now almost as she was—silly, snobbish, heartless,” this realization “ma[kes] no difference to his longing for her. Does it ever make any difference?” (226). That is, even for seeing her as she is he does not see his own concept-world any more clearly.

Referring back to my discussion in the first chapter, “sexual antagonism” is a useful description of the influx of negative feelings that Flory experiences, those unwelcome intrusions of intermixed repugnance and need that disturb the smooth form of relational and sexual ideals—no less than those similarly-rooted antagonisms that disturb the form of political and social ideals—and point to the contingent transferences and identifications that shape a seemingly natural desire. If Flory himself is unable to engage actively with, much less incorporate, the challenge of those intrusions, the reader is still left to make sense of them, especially as these seeming trials of the heart resonate into the political world of the novel. I want to look at one final example to exemplify this tendency in Flory’s concept-world. During his rambling, abortive marriage proposal, Flory asks Elizabeth: “Have I made myself at all clear to you? Have you got some picture of the life we live here? The foreigners, the solitude, the melancholy! Foreign trees, foreign flowers, foreign landscapes, foreign faces. It’s all as alien as a different planet.”³⁵ It is not

³⁵ Raymond Williams again in the “The New Metropolis” chapter of *The Country and the City*: “The birds and trees and rivers of England; the natives speaking, more or less, one’s own language: these were the terms of many imagined and actual settlements. The country, now, was a place to retire to” (282).

surprising that “she had not understood a word of what he was saying,” but it is significant that he continues to think of her face “as a pale oval, like a flower” (180). The ideological moves (the pastoral simplifications) that are so naturalized as to be unremarkable in going from Elizabeth’s face to an ostensibly-English flower become highly problematic in the explicit politicization apparent in the repudiation of foreign flowers as akin to foreign faces. This is not a naturalization of the social-political world, but an ostensibly harmless politicization of the natural world perniciously rebounding on social-political relations.

That is, in the pastoralization of domestic life, as a rustic countryside fantasia, Flory nurtures the impossible ideal that there can be a purely un-antagonistic relation to the natural world and to other humans. And in taking such ideal relations as the axiomatic basis for action in the larger social-political world—the way in which only Elizabeth’s arrival gives life to his “English” liberal ideals—he in the best-case scenario is energized in his quest to make that social-political world equally ideal, but in the more likely scenario that the novel unfolds he finds himself crippling unable to abide the deep-rootedness of antagonism in social-political life. This is particularly the case as those social-political antagonisms that he would confront armored with domestic bliss already exist unacknowledged and unfronted inside that domestic sphere. The novel, through the fraught oscillations of the double plot—the difficulty of making the domestic and the political visions cohere—and the complex incoherence of Flory’s spatializations, reveals the racial-national politics of his Arcadia, its foundation on an uninterrogated and unchallenged hypostatization of white English femininity, a seamless heterosexual communion, and a relation to nature falsified in dramatic ways in the Arcadians’ real lives. The novel displays how Flory not just simply ignores the violence and exploitation that underlies the political economy of the English drawing room and garden and the national-

imperial models of masculinity that are the flip side to his feminine ideal, but in the process turns them (in a not un-Benjaminian manner) into quasi-metaphysical afflictions insusceptible of comprehension, analysis, or amelioration.

Thus, the failure of the political vision in *Burmese Days* is not in some lack of political insight into the reality of imperialism, but rather cannot be disassociated from the stasis of the domestic vision. Sustained political interventions in an antagonistic political world become extraordinarily difficult when the fantasy of an antagonism-free, un-political domestic sphere is sustained as a viable reality. That this is, in many ways, the fate of a humanist liberalism, one whose engagements with the contingencies and antagonisms with the social and political world is predicated upon an idealized vision of domestic and sexual relations, is a thought I pick up with in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6:

Liberalism and the Despair of Modernity:

Contesting the Orwellian Double Plot of Self and Society

Orwell as Liberal

The analysis in the previous chapter is offered not merely as a reading of *Burmese Days*, but as a model for illuminating a recurring aspect of much of Orwell's fiction and nonfiction. Just as Benjamin has at the core of his cultural politics a debilitating nostalgia for a lost Adamic Paradise featuring perfect social-linguistic correspondences, most crucially in the form of a fully-satisfying *eros* and unmediated communally shared "experiences," so Orwell's cultural politics is predicated upon the loss of a secular national paradise of pastoral England, a site featuring perfect social-linguistic correspondences, most crucially in his case in the form of inspiring heterosexual relations and honest reliable plain-speaking.¹ Orwell is not the patron saint or official spokesman of liberalism, but his work reveals nonetheless, in its fraught modulations between the pastoral and the political, a central aspect of liberal thought. These shared features suggest liberalism's and socialism's shared genealogy as products of the crisis of foundations in European politics, and help position their undeniable substantive differences as in many ways a matter of inflections. In particular, what critical debates between socialists and liberals over the politics of Orwell's novels bring to light is a common incuriosity about the domestic idyll at the

¹ I have not discussed the linguistic correlates of Orwell's idealisms, but they can be seen in his famous essay "Politics and the English Language" (1946), in which the socialist-oriented Orwell agrees with the anti-socialist Le Bon that political master-signifiers are applied popularly as value judgments, but naively judges this practice entirely "dishonest" on all sides: "The words *democracy*, *socialism*, *freedom*, *patriotic*, *realistic*, *justice* have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another. In the case of a word like *democracy*, not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using that word if it were tied down to any one meaning" (162).

heart of Orwell's vision. While these critics argue over the appropriate forms of social and political rights and responsibilities, they do not actively consider how the root of such disagreements may lie in less-interrogated assumptions about sexual relations.

Nonetheless, what is most distinctly "liberal" (rather than "socialist") is the conviction that in the last instance the affective life of the individual is determinant, with all political values referring back to the needs of an unclearly distinguished set of core human feelings. In Orwell's fiction and nonfiction, the biting insight into the nature and genealogy of the ideological distortions of social and political relations is not consistently pursued in regards to the nature and genealogy of human subjectivity and distorted interpersonal relations. This leads in particular to a common situation for Orwell's protagonists in which at a very fundamental level the ineffable and irreplaceable allure of English girls becomes the sputtering engine and inconsistent standard of politics. (The most important corrective to this perspective is obviously feminism, which I will address in the conclusion with reference to Virginia Woolf.) The result of the liberal faith in the security of an inherently unstable foundation, the cherished fantasy of a redemptive arena of unantagonistic relations, is often a frustrated capitulation to the complexity of existing social and political relations whose innate antagonisms can at best be abided, only imperfectly redeemed, and never overcome. I will return to this depressive posture, one which liberal cultural critics often find themselves in, at the end of the next section.

I emphasize for now that *Burmese Days* "reveals" this struggle, because its conscientious depiction of Flory's failure to resolve the paradox of "radical liberalism" makes that paradox apparent and tangible. Though it is unlikely that Orwell would have intended or endorsed the argument here about the difficulty of a radical liberalism, his sincere and complex mapping of a certain (perhaps personally cherished) sensibility or imagination—his operations in and

commitment to the constitutively non-pragmatic literary discursive mode—displays for a critically-engaged reader the complex incoherence of that structure.² So even as my political conclusions, in their critical stance towards Flory's politics, may be similar to those by other leftist critics, like Eagleton, whom I consider below, I want to emphasize the key difference in our understanding of the role of the novel in facilitating these conclusions. I do not take Orwell as a failed novelist of liberalism or even quite as a novelist of a failed liberalism, but rather as a quite interesting and important novelist who insistently, unsparingly, perhaps even compulsively, charts the failures of liberal humanist protagonists, like Flory (and like Gordon Comstock and Winston Smith, both of whom I will discuss briefly below). In simplest terms, my critical reading neither requires a reference to Orwell's extra-literary politics or persona, nor do I offer it as an emendation of his or his novel's failed insights. Instead I am emphasizing a set of insights that Orwell's operations in and commitment to the constitutively non-pragmatic literary discursive mode make tangible for any reader.

Debating Liberalism via Orwell I: Eagleton and Hitchens

It can be difficult to find a good (or, even more importantly, historically precise) word said about liberalism in the academic humanities today, despite the considerable importance of the liberal democratic tradition to the establishment of the institutional academic spaces in which such reflexive anti-liberal dogma is nurtured. I am, of course, also critiquing in this part a certain blindness of a certain Orwellian form of liberal thought (as I critiqued the blindness of socialist admirers of Benjamin in the previous part), but the critique is offered in the spirit of a serious

² There is no denying that Orwell, when speaking for himself, kept faith with the promises and consolations of liberalism, and nothing in this essay that explores the ideological implications of his more impersonal literary texts suggests otherwise. This is after all the radical who wrote a manifesto on "A Nice Cup of Tea."

consideration of the liberal tradition's endurance, importance, and value (just as I take seriously the endurance, importance, and value of the socialist tradition). I emphasize here liberalism's generally inadequate reflection on the personal sphere as a contributor to what can be called its depressive posture. In this section, I first consider the dangers of a reflexively anti-liberal, politically "engaged" critical approach to Orwell's novel, exemplified by Terry Eagleton's tendentious reading of *Burmese Days*. I then consider Christopher Hitchens' defense of Orwell's politics, not without noting his failure to integrate his assessment of Orwell's nationalism with that of Orwell's gender imaginary, and his further failure to integrate both of those in turn with Orwell's politics. In the final part of this section, I briefly consider the relevance of Amanda Anderson's recent work on twentieth-century liberal cultural criticism to my arguments about Orwell.

Terry Eagleton's critique, in "George Orwell and the Lower Middle-class Novel," of *Burmese Days*'s supposedly incomplete critique of imperialism is a clear example of the problems that arise both when the novel's double plot is not considered in a holistic manner and when an ideological predisposition to the intellectual trajectory and reception of the man Orwell drives a reading of his fiction.³ I focus on Eagleton both because he is one of the few well-known critics to have written on *Burmese Days* at any length and because he is commonly well-regarded

³ It is worth mentioning that a recent review essay by Eagleton of Orwell biographies, entitled "Reach-Me-Down Romantic," is a more considered assessment of both supporters and detractors of Orwell. Eagleton acknowledges that "[t]he case for the defence is that Orwell was a magnificently courageous opponent of political oppression, a man of unswerving moral integrity and independence of spirit who risked his life fighting Fascism, narrowly escaped death at the hands of Stalin's agents in Spain, and denounced an imperialism of which he had had unpleasant first-hand knowledge as a young policeman in Burma." In critiquing a recent biography, Eagleton expresses how "it is perverse to judge him as though he were a Marxist-Leninist theoretician from whom marks must be deducted for falling down on the job," particularly singling out the biographer's endorsement of "[Raymond] Williams's curious assertion that Orwell was never able to see capitalism as a system, as though he indulged some naive early Dickensian fantasy that it was simply the work of wicked individuals." Eagleton does not mention that this was exactly his own assertion in the earlier essay I am considering here.

as an exponent of “political criticism.” Eagleton’s analysis, however, misses how the various aspects of the novel intertwine in ways that necessarily make any attempt to consider the novel’s political or romantic concerns in relative isolation, or to treat the latter as incidental or ephemeral in relation to the former, a distortion of the novel.⁴ Having already provided in the previous chapter an example of what a holistic reading of *Burmese Days* might look like, I will quickly consider in turn here three related and problematic assumptions that subtend Eagleton’s analysis: one relating to the genre of *Burmese Days*, one relating to the novel’s relation to the biographical Orwell, and one relating to the role of the romance plot within the novel as a whole. These assumptions are not unique to Eagleton, but in fact operate in much of the criticism of Orwell’s fictions.

First, the issue of genre. Eagleton’s analysis of *Burmese Days* occurs within an essay on the “lower middle-class novel,” immediately following a consideration of H.G. Wells’ *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910). Eagleton’s goal is to condemn the ideology, rooted in a lower middle-class perspective, of the “genre” of the naturalistic novel, which he describes as featuring:

an impatient, distressed or disgusted rejection of contemporary social experience which at the same time refuses any total understanding, and so any alternative position, as abstract, morally pretentious, naïvely Romantic or ‘ideological’. The provincial, puritan, lower middle-class world is hateful, but its pressures prevent any disengagement; and because puritan values are to that extent inescapable, any stance outside this world is condemned by them as an idle luxury. [...] It is this problem which we can now examine in the work of George Orwell. (77)

⁴ Similarly, Empson notes how “modern critics have passed over the comic part” of Middleton and Rowley’s *The Changeling*, indicating a general critical tendency to overlook “low”/sexual plots (49).

Now, at no point does Flory seriously contend that his dilemma is merely a search for “idle luxury,” nor does he castigate others on this ground. And it is far from obvious that the difficulty of disengaging the “puritan” worldview is an appropriate frame for an examination of *Burmese Days*, given that Flory keeps a native mistress (far from his first), loves “highbrow” literature, espouses socialist sentiments, and drinks copious amounts of gin to escape his troubles; disengagement is not his burden. “Provincial” is also a questionable designator for Flory’s “world,” given his situation about as far from the English provinces as possible, and sincere engagement with the language and culture of his foreign home. If such a “genre” as the “lower middle-class novel” is a meaningful category (and it may have explanatory power for a very different novel like *The History of Mr. Polly*), *Burmese Days* is not a promising candidate for it.

The situation becomes even more questionable when this “lower middle-class” genre is aligned further with “naturalism.” Still speaking of the same group of novels, Eagleton claims that “for the naturalistic novel, as we shall see most acutely in the case of Orwell, theory and experience, living and understanding, fragmentary feeling and overall structure, are desperately difficult to connect. It is this which accounts for the principle of non-selectiveness at the root of the naturalistic aesthetic” (77). Now perhaps some kind of “naturalism,” some effect of gritty verisimilitude, was desired by Orwell, but such objective “non-selectiveness” remains an impossible ambition.⁵ Any adequate view of literature would have to acknowledge that every literary text is a collection of intentional or unintentional, but nevertheless significant (or at least interesting) selections (and revisions) of the discourses of the worlds it would represent and from which it emerges. Even if a critic wants to organize texts under a particular aesthetic agenda

⁵ Orwell said famously in “Why I Write” that “I wanted to write enormous naturalistic novels with unhappy endings, full of detailed descriptions and arresting similes, and also full of purple passages in which words were used partly for the sake of their own sound. And in fact my first completed novel, *Burmese Days*, which I wrote when I was thirty but projected much earlier, is rather that kind of book” (311).

(naturalism, modernism, realism, etc.) that does not provide a useful basis for actually reading any individual text. Thus if Eagleton believes that in the general “lower middle-class,” indicatively liberal, worldview or in the typical “naturalist” novel “[t]he limits of ordinary experience are too crippling to permit the kind of transcendence which might subject a whole social condition to principled criticism,” he is prejudicing his engagement with the particular textual construct that Orwell offers as *Burmese Days*. Indeed, because of this Eagleton goes on to ignore the very specific kind of non-middle-class transcendence towards which Flory does aspire, the path towards which can hardly be seen as a “retreat to a dogged, disillusioned affirmation of the quotidian” or as indicating “man as a puppet of his environment” (my emphasis 77, 80). As I argued in the last chapter, Empsonian pastoralism’s attention to artifice and structure (not the futile grading of degrees of mimesis by genre-based critics) and Bal’s attention to the ideological import of “non-political” elements of a narrative offer a better framework for engaging the narrative structure and ideological forces operative in *Burmese Days* (and arguably all narrative fiction).⁶

The second problem for Eagleton relates to his unwillingness to clearly distinguish Orwell and Flory. For despite his framing reference to literary genres, he can barely make himself read *Burmese Days* as a novel at all, instead of as a failed political tract on imperialism by the liberal Orwell. For example, he bemoans that “*Burmese Days* is really less a considered critique of imperialism than an exploration of private guilt, incommunicable loneliness and loss

⁶ John V. Knapp, in “Dance to a Creepy Minuet: Orwell’s *Burmese Days*, Precursor of *Animal Farm*,” an essay challenging assessments of *Burmese Days* as amateur naturalism redeemed only by political candor, notes via a detailed (and speculative yet compelling) reading of animal imagery that “[a]s we re-examine *Burmese Days*, we find the realism of that novel fading and the surrealism, the demonic world of man/animal taking on new resonances, more important identifications than we had previously thought” (28). Knapp may have been animated by such evaluations as David L. Kubal’s in “George Orwell: The Early Novelist,” which dabbles in such quasi-Jamesian aestheticist pronouncements as “Orwell frequently mishandles autobiographical experience and overmanages his plot” and “he avoids excessive introspection, which he was not apparently capable of treating at any rate” (66, 67).

of identity for which Burma becomes at points little more than a setting,” to which the best response may be “yes” (85-86). But it is hardly the case that “[c]onsidered moral judgments” are “impossible” in Flory’s world. Indeed, the novel contains such clear “moral” indictments as “[t]he Indian Empire is a despotism—benevolent, no doubt, but still a despotism with theft as its final object” and that “most of [Flory’s civilian compatriots in Burma] *are* fools” (81, 68, 69). It should not, however, need explaining that a novel might more appropriately focus on the psychological-conceptual difficulties faced by an isolated and “trag[ically...] half-educated” businessman in sustaining this conviction in a hostile ideological field (68). Eagleton manages nonetheless to turn Flory’s ambivalence and self-loathing into a transparent bad faith, taking Flory’s wavering convictions—such as that the life of the sahiblog might be “unenviable,” that the “dull louts” at the club might be more manly than him (a worry that surfaces at the end of a night of drinking), and that the badness of his compatriots might not be a badness out of the ordinary—as somehow conferring “a vicarious merit” on the English imperialists or implying that he actually covets their “‘normal’ life” (68, 62, 84, 81). Indeed, based on such bouts of wavering conviction, Eagleton goes so far as to find subtly pro-imperialist tendencies in the novel, unwarrantedly referring to its “half-convinced apology [...] for some of the regime’s worst aspects” (78).⁷

This tendency is based in Eagleton’s unwillingness to consider that a reader might be able to distinguish Flory from the narrator and the narrator from Orwell. Eagleton works with the

⁷ Near the end of his discussion of *Burmese Days*, Eagleton attempts to consolidate his interpretation through a symbolic reading of Flory’s birthmark: “the birthmark is a telling detail which the novel can mobilise in support of its thesis that moral stances are impracticable. [...] The novel certainly goes a good way towards endorsing Flory’s raging at imperialism; but it suggests, simultaneously, that the anger is privately motivated, the gesture of a man who is out of the ordinary, and to that extent not a reliably ‘objective’ critic of the system” (85). It is simply inaccurate to say that the novel’s critique of imperialism is grounded in the private person of Flory (this ignores the critical statements of the narrator altogether) and thus it is a distortion to say that for the novel “the genetic issue finally predominates over the social question” (85).

perhaps not rare, but nonetheless spurious, assumption that readers automatically endorse the worldview of a novel's protagonist and that that worldview represents the novel's official ideology, one implicitly affirmed by its author. This is a particularly unfounded assumption for a novel like *Burmese Days* in which the protagonist is not the narrator, nor exceptionally similar to the author. And yet since Eagleton is certain that Flory is "much more directly a projection of the younger Orwell himself" and that he "manifests his author's own guilty self-hatred and uncertainty," he has no difficulties in condemning the novel's "sullen acceptance of the *status quo*" (82, 80). Thus even though Eagleton seemingly realizes that the novel Orwell wrote attempts to dramatize the critical (hardly conformist) insight that "[t]o strike a radical stance in a conservative society is to risk the loss of identity," he still oddly castigates Orwell for not writing a different novel (or treatise) that "trust[s] to an idea of identity discovered through a *collective rejection*" (81).⁸ Instead of criticizing Orwell/Flory for an inadequate radical consciousness, Eagleton might have more clearly focused on the sources of Flory's ideological "deadlock" (what I consider throughout this part as unacknowledged antagonisms of the liberal mind) (84).

This leads to the third problematic area of Eagleton's essay: his lack of consideration of the interplay of the romance plot. If the novel does not dramatize a successful protest against

⁸ Lynette Hunter also focuses on the absence of positively represented collective struggle in *Burmese Days*. In doing this, she offers in "Blood and Marmalade: Negotiations between the State and the Domestic in George Orwell's Early Novels" a melodramatic and imprecise account of Flory's dilemma that mistakenly attributes his suicide to his political isolation. She writes that Flory "doesn't become aware enough of the compromise [made by his class between private and public]; therefore he cannot understand the private deprivation of his life which the state requires by making him lead a double life. He is aware of the brutality he mediates as an agent of imperial Britain which simultaneously requires him to think of himself as a civiliser, a mediator of civilisation. In the end, Flory cannot stand the tension and kills himself" (207). There is in fact no indication in the novel that Flory thinks of himself as a "civilizer" or that he lacks awareness of the relation of his "private deprivation" and imperial "brutality." Working with an un-nuanced notion of a seamless capitalist-nation-state-power complex as the obvious enemy, Hunter like Eagleton turns the complex ideological contestations of *Burmese Days* into a simple object lesson about the futility of non-communal activism: "Orwell's novels are exercises in the evaluation and placing of the 'many' voices [of personal memory and public history]; they are illustrations of the near impossibility of maintaining a continual assessment of them, or even at all, without a supportive community" (214).

imperialism it is not because of any lack of awareness in Flory as to imperialism's errors or lack of conviction as to his own ethical obligation. Indeed, Flory does in fact do the right thing, and the political conflict concerning membership in the club was headed toward a successful resolution. At the final club meeting, Flory determines that "[h]e had got to say his say" and that "he could not break" his promise to Dr. Veraswami, that "[h]e had got to see this thing through," proclaiming "'Yes. I propose Dr. Veraswami as a member of this Club'" (234, 235). This meeting is cut short, but after routing the rebellion against the club, Flory re-affirms that he will expend his acquired social capital—"The others would eat out of his hand until the absurd riot was forgotten; he could have gone into the Club and made a speech in favour of Lenin, and they would have put up with it"—so that Dr. Veraswami's "election to the Club could be taken as assured" (258, 260). This resolution disconfirms Eagleton's claim that the novel warns against "the contaminating risks of a moral stance" as "one more form of 'humbug'" (80). That the novel does not finally have a positive ending is related to events around the romance plot that Eagleton does not discuss.

When Eagleton does consider the romance plot, it is as an afterthought, saying of the novel that:

what really occupies its centre is the personal relationship of Flory and Elizabeth. (It is worth adding that for this reason the novel succeeds technically more than most of the others, precisely because it avoids that direct confrontation with a social condition which in later works leads to a crude and latently unbalanced generalising. It also succeeds because Orwell, like Flory, loves Burma as much as he hates it, a fact which reveals itself in the rich precision of physical description (the landscape, the leopard-hunt), and which

disappears when Orwell shifts his attention to England, which cannot, as a physical place, be loved at all.) (86)

Given that in his view Elizabeth is the center of the novel, it is surprising that his account of her is given literally in parentheses, with some of the most important features given within parentheses inside parentheses, such as the landscape and the leopard-hunt that featured prominently in my reading in the previous chapter. Ultimately, Eagleton's retreat to diluted evaluative aestheticist categories ("technical success") to talk about Elizabeth's function in the novel as merely part of a "personal relationship" actually duplicates the liberal bourgeois ideology that he would repudiate. The tie between the personal and the political is more complexly elaborated in Orwell's novels than Eagleton's essay indicates.

The polemical defense of Orwell carried out by Christopher Hitchens in *Why Orwell Matters* encounters not dissimilar problems to Eagleton's in its discussion of the novels. Hitchens' main burden is to provide copious documentary evidence, culled from Peter Davison's twenty-volume edition of *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, of what I in the last chapter referred to as Orwell's thoughtful and direct engagements with the realities of imperialism, poverty, and war. Of the texts collected in this edition, Hitchens boasts, "it has lately proved possible to reprint every single letter, book review and essay composed by Orwell without exposing him to any embarrassment" (4). Hitchens' book is a direct challenge to the conventional disparagement of Orwell's progressive credentials by a certain strand of the British left, of which Terry Eagleton and Raymond Williams can stand as fair representatives. Since I do not disagree that Orwell's political analyses remain thoughtful and challenging even for our present situation, and that it would take a quite jaundiced eye to see him as a crypto-reactionary, I will not here lay out the details of Hitchens' defense, which is on the whole cogent. Instead,

given this dissertation's interest in the influence of formulations of private relations on political ones, more pertinent is the role of women in Hitchens' book, starting with what could be taken as Hitchens' thesis statement: "Orwell was essentially 'right' about the three great issues of fascism, Stalinism and Empire, and that he was enabled to be 'right' by a certain insistence on intellectual integrity and independence" (155). The most obvious exclusion from this list of the "great issues" of the twentieth century is "feminism," arguably of greater social and historical and political importance, that is underlying more significant and unprecedented alterations in the social order, than either "fascism" or "Stalinism," and an issue on which Orwell was far from "right." That Hitchens does not include feminism as a "great issue" of twentieth century politics suggests a limited conception of the sphere of politics and an impoverished vision of the radical political subject.

In Hitchens' accounts, this radical political subject is a solitary quasi-Nietzschean hero, no doubt best exemplified in our present situation by Hitchens himself, who can be "essentially 'right'" (because politics is understood as ideological contestations within a well-defined rational discursive field) about the "great issues" (because politics is understood to be a matter of weighty state, or otherwise public, politics) due to his "integrity and independence" (because the political subject is understood as an autonomous intellectual formation guarded by cherished negative liberties). Each of the quoted phrases in the previous sentence demonstrates the most commonly recognized problematic assumptions of liberal ideology: its rationalism, its individualism, and its isolation of a private sphere. That is to say, it is undeniable that Orwell's critiques of fascism, Stalinism, and Empire are incisive and of continuing relevance, but one should not base an assessment of Orwell's political vision solely on them or sustain a vision of Orwell's political development as such an autonomous achievement. Consider the manner in

which Hitchens characterizes Orwell's writing career: "he made his own living in his own way and never had to call any man master. [...] He faced the competing orthodoxies and despotisms of his day with little more than a battered typewriter and a stubborn personality" (8). This raises several questions, chief among which is: how battered? This romance of the hermetic critical intellect achieving single-handed victory over political falsehood would be more palatable if Hitchens did not himself indicate, and then downplay, aspects of Orwell's writings that failed to challenge "orthodoxy," aspects that decisively influenced the tenor of Orwell's, however much otherwise iconoclastic, political vision.

For example, Hitchens discusses Orwell's sexism and homophobia—"He went well out of his way to take a stick to 'nancy-boys', 'pansies' and 'sodomy' and this, as we have come to know, can be a bad sign"—and other "traditional" aspects of his worldview, including his fairly conventional form of nationalism and his anti-Americanism (146). The sexism is an "embarrassment" about which Hitchens is generally forthright. He notes that "George Orwell's relationship with the female sex was in general a distraught one, and he had a tendency to let it show" and that "in neither his fiction nor his journalism is the word 'feminist' ever used except with, or as, a sneer" (141, 142). However, in Hitchens' account such traditional attitudes are treated primarily as quirks of personality—attributes of the man and not the thinker—without any obvious relevance thus for the political thought. For example, an "apparent contradiction" in Orwell's faunal pastoralism is resolved by reference to "Orwell's sense of proportion," an unenlightening recourse to an integral personality (135). And when dismissing conservative attempts to appropriate Orwell's legacy, Hitchens writes that "George Orwell was conservative about many things, but not about politics" (102). The clear distinction between personal beliefs and political ones is both commonsensical and not theoretically credible. Yet, under this view,

Hitchens' final word on Orwell's sexism confines it as an interesting complexity of the man—"Victim of a narrow-minded patriarch himself, he would have liked to be a firm but gentle father"—and dissolves it back into an aspect of his essentially decent personality: "At least it can be said for Orwell that he registered his participation in this unending conflict [over what "in human and sexual relations" is normal] with a decent minimum of hypocrisy" (154). This is a missed opportunity to gauge the political valences of Orwell's service in this "unending conflict," as opposed to simply footnoting his dishonorable combat.

Such oversights are apparent in Hitchens' chapter discussing the novels. There is nothing incorrect in what he says in his summaries of their themes and plots, but his assessment of them is almost entirely limited to aestheticist or ideological evaluations (or to noting their echoes in later mid-century British fiction). In the evaluative mode, in discussing Orwell's first novel Hitchens says that "[t]o read the initial pages of *Burmese Days* today is to be quite taken aback by how poor they are." He criticizes the novel's tendency to tell not show, part of its overall "clumsiness and naiveté" that is overcome "[p]artly by the sheer sincerity of its prose," which is at least able to communicate Flory's "outrage" and "suppressed finer feeling" to the reader (178). On ideological grounds, Hitchens offers praise to the novel, since some of its "treatment of race and sex is quite advanced for its time, and quite candid, too" (179). It is important to note that Hitchens is here referring only to the sexual exploitation of native women, not the characterization of Elizabeth. There is no insight into the psychological or conceptual relation of Flory's suicide-inducing "unpardonable and unbearable thoughts of Elizabeth's defloration by another man" and his aforementioned political "sincerity" and "outrage" (180). While Hitchens does mention Elizabeth here, he does not in this chapter mention Rosemary when discussing

Keep the Aspidistra Flying—summed up as set in a “frowtsy world of futility and inanition, penny-pinching and oppressive respectability”—or Julia when discussing *1984* (184).

Hitchens’ final assessment of the 1930s novels is the conventional view that “[t]hese four pre-war efforts constitute a sort of amateur throat-clearing” (186). And his conventional evaluative praise for *1984* is based on the fact that “[i]t is the first and only time that his efforts as a novelist rise to the level of his essays” (190). While *1984* might in its argumentative mode or stylistic discipline make a better anti-totalitarian essay, my argument throughout these two chapters has been that the novel’s overall structure—accounting for argumentative, descriptive, and narrative moments—shares significant similarities with the supposedly less accomplished earlier efforts, *and* with essays such as “Inside the Whale,” which I discuss in a footnote below. None of these texts can be fully accounted for without attention to the decisive role of sexual attitudes on political ones: the standard focus on the political ideology of the isolated Orwellian hero leads to distorted readings of novels so involved with his transformative encounters with Orwellian heroines. Hitchens provides a valuable service in clearing the air of some of the most toxic misapprehensions about and defamations of Orwell, but he does not provide sufficiently nuanced interpretative tools to read Orwell’s thought in all its complexity.

In particular, there is more to say about the “oppressive sense of futility and even of despair” that Hitchens detects in the 1930s novels, but which is no less present in *1984* (174). He cites Isaac Deutscher and Raymond Williams complaining of this despair, but responds only by stating that “[n]ot one of [a group of Eastern European anti-communist intellectuals] failed to pay some tribute to George Orwell” and that “[l]east of all [were these intellectuals’ efforts] the outcome of despair and resignation” (57). Yet the prevalence of despair and resignation in Orwell’s fiction and nonfiction, such as exhibited in Flory’s suicide, and their paradoxical

correspondence with an apprehension of the world that is “essentially ‘right,’” remains to be explained, as does the greater despair of the novels. The success of Orwell’s novels in totalitarian societies—like the popularity that Hitchens ascribes to *Animal Farm* in Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe (75-76)—tells us little about their function elsewhere, particularly in liberal democracies, where (as Hitchens acknowledges) the reason for their popularity and their uses have been quite different. The sources of Orwell’s despair, as I will argue in greater detail below in my readings of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *1984*, are not simply a clear-headed view of political reality.

Amanda Anderson, in two recent essays on twentieth-century liberal cultural criticism, “Character and Ideology: The Case of Cold War Liberalism” and “The Liberal Aesthetic,” pursues this link between liberal idealism and despair. She notes the difficulty of pursuing a sympathetic analysis of liberal thought in the current academic scene, since “[a]s a political formation, liberalism is not favoured within an academic context in which radical politics are privileged, and as an aesthetic, liberalism is seen as narrowly focused on temperament and harmonious diversity, rather than the formally and conceptually challenging modes associated with radicalism.” She conceives of her project as “a defence of liberalism” that “seeks to reconceptualize what a liberal aesthetics might mean in a context of a renewed understanding of liberal thought” (“Liberal” 249). Based on the currently available work on this project, the full outline of what Anderson takes to be a “liberal aesthetics”—as distinct from liberal politics—remains to be fully drawn, so I offer no critical commentary upon it here. The hints she provides indicate that for her this aesthetic is exemplified by “the placement of argument within narrative, and the relation between argument and those aspects of existence that limit, inflect, or transcend

argument” in “the political novel of ideas” (“Character” 224). Anderson elaborates, on the foregrounding of argumentative contestation in “liberal” art:

Argument is often (but by no means necessarily) expressive of a kind of liberal energy that is overlooked in readings that privilege plot closure over other forms.⁹ Ideology critique, which reads the political novel symptomatically, is typically unable to credit the forms of reflective critique that argument enacts. And when the political novel forcefully emphasizes forms of experience that exceed the reach of politics, it is often read as evasive or escapist. But these elements can be differently understood. The liberal aesthetic typically gives expression to both the political aspiration, and the larger bleak apprehension of all that thwarts it, or limits it, or even makes it existentially less than sustaining for some. (“Character” 225)

It appears then that her analysis will further claims applicable to Orwell’s novels, even despite her American focus, especially as she roots her genealogy of liberal cultural critique in “American liberalism of the thirties and forties, when liberalism was articulated as a refusal of communism on the one hand (whose utopianism was seen as entailing grave dangers) and fascism on the other” (“Liberal” 250). Orwell’s novels clearly exemplify this tension between an Arcadian aspirational “form of experience” and a “larger bleak apprehension.”

It is her reclamation or reparative re-evaluation of this “bleak apprehension” that should prove of greatest interest, and which will provide a useful challenge to the reflexive anti-liberalism of the academy. Whereas Hitchens seems to waver on the consequences of the

⁹ It will be interesting to see Anderson’s further work that attempts to give analytical and theoretical flesh to the somewhat vague notion of “liberal energy” and claims such as the following: “The liberal tradition is not as prosaic, rule-governed and simply hopeful as its critics seem to suppose; certain kinds of aspiration and threshold experiences, certain energies at once negative and utopian, are as vital within the liberal aesthetic tradition as they are in the Marxist aesthetics of someone like Adorno” (“Liberal” 260).

bleakness in Orwell, and whereas I argue for its debilitating tie to unchallenged idealisms, Anderson acknowledges its undeniable presence in twentieth-century liberal thought but ties it to the seriousness of the liberal intellectual commitment to liberty. On the reality, and seeming inevitability of a philosophical descent into despair, she notes “an entirely different facet of the liberal character that has been present since the beginning—a pessimism or bleakness that derives from an awareness of those forces and conditions that threaten the realization of liberal ambitions,” namely “the psychological, social and economic barriers to its moral and political ideals. Liberalism is best understood, that is, as a philosophical and political aspiration conceived in an acute awareness of the challenges and often bleak prospects confronting it” (“Character” 213; “Liberal” 250). That bleakness is an essential, or even befitting, response to a serious consideration of the manifold barriers to liberty is, to say the least, questionable; there is no reason to delimit the affective range of possible responses to such realizations. One could construct a quite varied repertoire of affective dispositions by charting the variable moods of the political thought of, to limit it to just a few of the writers who feature in this dissertation, Marx, Freud, de Man, Adorno, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Empson, and Woolf.¹⁰

¹⁰ The stereotypical liberal descent may have less to do with “an acute awareness” of reality and more with an uninterrogated fetishization of one kind of life, an inflexible “domestic aesthetics” with racial, ideological, and sexual components. Philip Rieff, in “George Orwell and the Post-Liberal Imagination,” also argues for a link between liberal insight and liberal despair, given the fall out of “liberal-Christian civilization” into “a world that is no longer liberal” (59, 50). He does not consider that the source of the problem might be the limitations of that liberal-Christian worldview. And he does not, as in the following, consider the contingent particularity of what is not after all a very “old style” of thinking at all: “As a liberal, Orwell is revered for nothing so much as his intellectual integrity. But intellectual integrity also points up the despair of the liberals, for it shows how meaningless the old style of questioning and searching has become” (63). A more historical sense of the genealogies, aporias, and aesthetics of liberalism might temper the incommensurate hysteria that otherwise “liberal” thinkers, like Hitchens in his pronouncements on Islam, generate when faced with the challenge of un-liberal worldviews. Having unwarrantedly hypostatized liberalism as the settled ideology of the west, they turn such conflict quite readily into a battle between “civilizations,” rather than recognizing it as a discursive contestation over the form of society that has not reached resolution even within the “western tradition.”

For the purposes of this dissertation, I return to the analysis of Orwell's novels to continue to explore the tie between political despair and sexual idealism, the consequences of the attempt to abide or assuage the contingencies and antagonisms of the political world with the flimsy conceptual armor of nostalgic pastoral forms.

Arcadia versus Bohemia: Baudelairean Themes in Orwell

One of the most interesting features of Orwell's discursive exfoliations and engagements around despair, one relevant for the concept-world of this dissertation, is the submerged Baudelairean theme in Orwell's writings. These sporadic flashes of Baudelaire at moments when his protagonists despair are some of the most pronounced indications of Orwell's struggle with liberal ideals and some of the clearest textual complexifications of his protagonists' liberal values. Eagleton notes quizzically, in his later essay, how Orwell "was so severely afflicted with this *nostalgie de la boue*," a conventionally patronizing phrase that even Hitchens assents to ("Reach" 7; *Why* 10). Such "bohemian" gestures do sometimes appear as the kind of superficial romanticizing that the phrase suggests, as when Flory gushes to Elizabeth about Paris: "I've never even seen it. But, good Lord, how I've imagined it! Paris—it's all a kind of jumble of pictures in my mind; cafés and boulevards and artists' studios and Villon and Baudelaire and Maupassant all mixed up together" (84). It does not, however, take recourse to the biographical fact that these lines were written after Orwell's decidedly un-romantic sojourn in Paris to ironize this sentiment.¹¹ The arch-English Elizabeth's discourse in the novel itself deflates Flory's

¹¹ A stay documented in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). In that book Orwell explicitly cites Baudelaire's ugly feelings: "You discover the boredom which is inseparable from poverty; the times when you have nothing to do and, being underfed, can interest yourself in nothing. For half a day at a time you lie on your bed, feeling like the *jeune squelette* in Baudelaire's poem. Only food could rouse you. You discover that a man who has gone even a week on bread and margarine is not a man any longer, only a belly with a few accessory organs" (19).

romance, striking a more genuinely Baudelairean tone, as when the narrator describes her thoughts on her bohémienne mother's lodgings: "The state of her studio was more than depressing to Elizabeth; it was evil, Satanic" (92). Indeed, the strands of Baudelaireanism in Orwell's texts can be better read as a kind of minority report that suggests that the operations of innate natural, social, and psychic forces may not in fact be as congenial to human needs and ideals as his protagonists (and he himself perhaps) would most like to believe.¹²

The tension between the lived knowledge of Bohemia and the wish for an idealized Arcadia manifests in several important, and critically neglected, ways. For example, for a moment in *Burmese Days* Flory intuits a vision of the jungle that is more satanic than pastoral: "He noticed a wild vanilla plant trailing over a bush, and bent down to sniff at its slender, fragrant pods. The scent brought him a feeling of staleness and deadly ennui. Alone, alone, in the sea of life enisled! The pain was so great that he struck his fist against a tree, jarring his arm and splitting two knuckles" (215). Though Flory will continue to think, in line with the Matthew Arnold poem he cites here, that it is an external authoritarian force ("A God, a god their

¹² Another interesting site, here nonfictional, where Orwell attempts to resolve these tensions between his Baudelaireanism and his naturalism, or in a different configuration his liberalism and his socialism, is "Inside the Whale." The pressure of impending war (the Phony War period when fighting was imminent but not yet initiated) highlights the antinomies of Orwell's thought, making the strangeness of the imaginative conjunction of Arcadia and Bohemia more tangible perhaps than at any other place in his oeuvre. In particular the parallel tracks of social critique (politics) and domesticity (pastoral-aesthetics) are brought together in a fairly concise way. The basic argument of the essay, advocating the aptness of *Tropic of Cancer* for the times, lays out a starkly apparent "double plot" of sex (Henry Miller) and politics (fascism). But it turns out to be, at heart, a very domesticated vision, a retreat to a pastoral sex without antagonism. This is apparent in how Orwell's often effusive, inarticulate praise for the pornographic *Tropic of Cancer* still tries to distance itself from sex per se as a point of interest, as for example when he states that "Miller is writing about the man in the street, and it is incidentally rather a pity that it should be a street full of brothels" (for Orwell says he is only interested in celebrating the erotic life of the "average sensual man"), or he condescendingly notes that a hallmark of this bohemia was "gruff-voiced lesbians in corduroy breeches and young men in Grecian or medieval costume" (213, 211). However, one could hardly call brothels and bedbugs incidental to the effects of *Tropic of Cancer*, such that Orwell hardly seems to register (for better or worse) Miller's existential challenge. He also, as Jeanette Winterson notes, "doesn't notice that Miller-women are semi-human sex objects" and that "'Inside the Whale' barely mentions women at all" (1).

severance ruled”) that militates against the desired communion of securely-individuated (“enisled”) subjectivities, Orwell still grants him some inchoate impression, in the form of the “staleness and deadly ennui” induced by the pastoral jungle’s own wild vanilla, that the difficulty might be more innate.¹³ Thus even if Flory does not resolve the conflict between a nature that enervates and the more healthful regeneration of the domed green grotto and even if he does not allow this glimmering awareness of innate conflict to challenge his simple vision of antagonism as an external impingement on nature and the essential human, the novel seems to suggest the reader might do best not to follow him.

This conflict manifests in more pronounced ways in accounts of femininity, domesticity, and sex. So again, alongside the repetitive accounts of the ineffable idealized appeal of English girls, there are unpursued flashes of a more disenchanted, Baudealirean, awareness. For example, Ma Hla May foregrounds Flory’s more disreputable feelings surrounding sexual relations when she questions, “Why is master always so angry with me when he has made love to me?” (54). And Flory himself casts his affairs with Burmese women in terms that do not disguise the fraught psychic dynamics of sexual relations: “For a moment it seemed to him that an endless procession of Burmese women, a regiment of ghosts, were marching past him in the moonlight. Heavens, what numbers of them! A thousand—no, but a full hundred at the least. [...] He had dirtied himself beyond redemption, and this was his just punishment” (196). Even as he attempts to convince himself that, as I have quoted, “Elizabeth, by coming into his life, had so changed it and renewed it that all the dirty, miserable years might never have passed,” the novel gives the reader no reason to assent to the possibility of such redemptions (151). Indeed, Flory’s unresolved oscillation here between the regeneration of a clean and redemptive sexuality and a

¹³ “Alone, alone, in the sea of life enisled” is from Matthew Arnold’s “To Marguerite: Continued.”

nauseating experience of more “base” sexual experiences provides the most explicit rhetorical continuity with the next novel to be considered, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*.

Gordon Comstock, the poet protagonist of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, when not engaged in tirades related to his political plot centered on a secret “war on money,” is overcome like Flory when thinking of his sexual encounters before the clean and wholesome Rosemary, the chief object of his romance plot, entered his life: “His mind moved backwards over his ten years of adult life. The faces of women flowed through his memory. Ten or a dozen of them there had been. Tarts, also. *Comme au long d’un cadavre un cadavre étendu*. And even when they were not tarts it had been squalid, always squalid” (104).¹⁴ The citation here, from Gordon’s memory, from Baudelaire’s sonnet “Une nuit que j’étais près d’une affreuse Juive” is less surprising than it might first appear given that Gordon counts Baudelaire’s “*Les Fleurs du Mal*” among the very few books he has retained during his penury (29). Along with his earlier “[a]lmost involuntarily” citing from Baudelaire’s “Au Lecteur” (as I quoted at the end of the fourth chapter), during the course of the novel Gordon gets a poem about a “dying prostitute” published (29, 79).¹⁵ Whereas

¹⁴ On the surprising centrality of squalidness in Orwell’s imaginary, William Empson, in a reminiscence on his time working with Orwell on wartime propaganda at the BBC Eastern Service, “Orwell at the BBC,” relates Orwell’s “firmly expressed distaste for homosexuality” to his “deep internal revulsions” surrounding bodily processes (also seen in his “settled enough assumption” that “[t]he working classes smell”) and considers it “a serious weakness in his political judgment” (97). In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Gordon twice despises “the fashionable Nancy Boy” (32, 150). In contrast to the filth of the Nancies, there is Gordon’s draw towards Ravelston’s clean English manly physicality: “Gordon sidled closer to Ravelston as they started down the pavement. He would have taken his arm, only of course one can’t do that kind of thing. Beside Ravelston’s taller, comelier figure he looked frail, fretful and miserably shabby. He adored Ravelston and was never quite at ease in his presence” (81). Later when Gordon is drunk: “Ravelston shepherded him across the circus, Gordon clinging to his arm, but not for support, for his legs were still quite steady” (169).

¹⁵ Baudelaire, even if not a prominent intertext, is hardly an anomalous presence in Orwell’s writings. Indeed, an under-explored aspect of Orwell’s fiction is its running aesthetic-ideological commentary on the literary culture of his time: along with English flowers, English authors are a major recurrence in *Burmese Days* (for example, Flory judges both Elizabeth and Verrall harshly for their taste in authors) and the first chapter of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is set in a used bookstore and full of pointed commentary on Orwell’s literary colleagues and predecessors.

Baudelaire draws ethical resources from his unflinching insight into sexual relations, Gordon only roughly intuits here the relevance of such squalidness to understanding the degradation of capitalism and the darkening political scene. The best he manages throughout is a feeble indictment of “[t]he imbecility, the emptiness, the desolation” of “our whole civilisation,” of which the two chief symptoms for him in this tirade are “machine guns” and, oddly, “French letters” (condoms) (84-85).¹⁶ Thus Gordon (like Flory before him and Winston after) flinches quite readily when drawn too close to Baudelairean insights, failing to apprehend the relevance of the complex phantasms of sexual relations to social-political struggles such as a supposed “war on money.” Yet his narrators’ misapprehensions cannot be extended as Orwell’s beliefs. It needs to be re-emphasized that it is Orwell who stages such dilemmas in his writing.

So, for example, in *Aspidistra* it is only with the wrong type of women that Gordon can analytically appreciate femininity as a kind of social convention. When considering sexually undesirable women, he has no difficulty trading in stereotypes that show up certain women’s formulaic genericness: he sneers at a “schoolmarm [...] feminist,” at “malignant respectable women” and “derelict spinsters,” at an “old maid,” at “hen-witted middle-aged women” and “colourless, spectacled and intensely disagreeable” librarians, among others (17, 18, 23, 40, 41, 64, 232). And even with sexually attractive women who are too poor or too rich (thereby not the proper object on which to project pastoral fantasies), Gordon has Baudelairean glimmers that suggest how their narcotic feminine appeal can be conceived as a construct of component

¹⁶ Gordon/Orwell’s problematic attitudes towards contraception and maternity deserve their own essay. For example, when Rosemary refuses to proceed during their first assignation because Gordon is not using a condom the “natural alcove” turns into “a wet field on a Sunday afternoon—and in mid-winter at that!” (141). Their exchange at that moment: “You don’t think I go in for that kind of thing, do you?” // “But what else can we do? I can’t have a baby, can I?” / “You must take your chance. [...] This birth-control business! It’s just another way they’ve found out of bullying us. And you want to acquiesce in it, apparently” (141-142). Or when the teenage Gordon muses: “How right the lower classes are! Hats off to the factory lad who with fourpence in the world puts his girl in the family way! At least he’s got blood and not money in his veins” (44).

artifices, not least of all makeup and perfume. He comments on “[t]he appalling faces of tarts, like skulls coated with pink powder” and greatly anticipates a literary party because it would expose him to “tea and cigarettes and the smell of women” (166, 63). And of his wealthy friend Ravelston’s wealthy girlfriend, “that bitch Hermione Slater,” a callous English siren of the Elizabeth Lackersteen sort, the narrator says: “The woman-scent breathed out of her, a powerful wordless propaganda against all altruism and all justice” (192, 98). Yet, even so, a more organic figuration occasionally applies to the pretty, young Hermione, whose naked body is “like a ripe warm fruit,” who lapses into naps “as promptly as an animal,” and whose “skin and hair [...] are] like a wheatfield in the sun” (95, 96, 93). And behind all these stereotypes and artifices, Gordon’s liberal creed holds that there must be a fully natural woman embodying an untainted femininity. Consider, in this regard, Flory’s comparison of the organic Elizabeth and inorganic Ma Hla May: “No contrast could have been stranger; the one faintly coloured as an apple-blossom, the other dark and garish, with a gleam almost metallic on her cylinder of ebony hair” (87).

Just as with Flory, a wooded region figures prominently in Gordon’s romantic-political imagination, as both a fabular place where he seeks respite from urban-civilizational degradations and a narrative space expressing the elemental nature of romantic heterosexual communion. Namely, Gordon and Rosemary (whose floral name requires little comment) take a day trip with the implicit understanding that they will consummate their relationship in the country: a train to Slough, a bus to Farnham Common, and from there a trek through the Burnham Beeches and surrounding country. They walk until “[i]t was hard to believe that they were only twenty miles out of London” (127).¹⁷ Rosemary enthuses over the beech leaves

¹⁷ This green space is part of a fairly schematic larger map of the social space, whose chief oppositions include the green space of the country near the Burnham Beeches versus the city space of

(“They’re like gold. They really are like gold”) and Gordon is delighted by “two swans” who are first seen swimming in “smooth green water” (128, 136). They eventually reach a site suitably rustic for their assignation:

When they got to the bushes they found a natural alcove. On three sides were beds of thorn, leafless but impenetrable, and on the other side you looked downhill over a sweep of naked ploughed fields. At the bottom of the hill stood a low-roofed cottage, tiny as a child’s toy, its chimneys smokeless. Not a creature was stirring anywhere. You could not have been more alone than in such a place. The grass was the fine mossy stuff that grows under trees. (139)¹⁸

Like Flory’s domed “green grotto,” this “natural alcove” is a bit of the wild woods that has been narrativized as a simplified pastoral space suited to human aesthetic standards of the picturesque and retiring, complete with a (ruined?) cottage, an ideal site for an entirely non-sordid sexual communion. And, just as in Flory’s imagination, by the end of the novel this ideal space of sexual communion has its natural outcome in marriage and maternity in that related pastoral space of the English drawing room. That is, what started in the “natural alcove” ends in another paradise of privacy and intimacy:

They fell into absurd raptures over each separate stick of furniture. The double bed with the clean sheet ready turned down over the pink eiderdown! The linen and towels stowed away in the chest of drawers! The gateleg table, the four hard chairs, the two armchairs,

London with its hated aspidistras, and within that city space lower class privacy (Gordon’s room) versus lower class public space (the pub) versus upper class private space (Ravelston’s flat) versus upper class public space (the restaurant Modigliani’s).

¹⁸ A bit later the narrator says: “As the clouds melted away a widening yellow beam slid swiftly across the valley, gilding everything in its path. Grass that had been dull green shone suddenly emerald” (140). This does not just look backward to the “green grotto” of *Burmese Days*, but also ahead to the “golden country” to which Winston and Julia escape for their tryst in 1984.

the divan, the bookcase, the red Indian rug, the copper coal-scuttle which they had picked up cheap in the Caledonian market! And it was all their own, every bit of it was their own—at least, so long as they didn't get behind with the instalments! (245)

This is a lot of enthusiasm over rental furniture.

Like in *Burmese Days*, the romance plot, fairly self-contained and a bit insipid, ultimately is revealed to be the engine of Gordon's actions. More interestingly, also like *Burmese Days*, it is accompanied by the protagonist's political struggle against an aspect of his society's material and ideological conditions, here capitalism writ large rather than imperialism. The novel opens with him in a state of self-inflicted poverty as his protest against this hated capitalism, and this plot gestures toward a scathing "naturalist" critique of consumer capitalism, class inequities, middle class striving, urban poverty, among other aspects of contemporary class society, with Gordon railing relentlessly at the degradations inflicted on the moneyless (and even the moneyed) and arguing over the merits of socialism with his friend Ravelston, a "parlour Socialist" (174).¹⁹ In this vein, he notes of a couple of "tramps" that they were "[t]he throw-outs of the money-god"; of his former occupation, advertising, that it "is the dirtiest ramp that capitalism has yet produced"; and of the debilitating effect of poverty on his poetry, that "[l]ack of money means discomfort, means squalid worries, means shortage of tobacco, means ever-present consciousness of failure—above all, it means loneliness [... a]nd in loneliness no decent book was ever written" (16, 51, 31). One can already see in this claim that loneliness is the worst effect of poverty (and that decent books have never been written in loneliness!) the pastoralism of the romance world redounding problematically upon social and political understandings.

¹⁹ Andrew Ettin in *Literature and the Pastoral* notes that Gordon's vehement anti-capitalism, in fact, lacks "naturalistic" texture from the outset: "His response, so vigorous in its denials, is a different form of pastoral: a kind of self-containment that functions within his life very much like a more conventional form of the pastoral, giving it a nucleus of direction or focal point of meaning and values, though it is imagistically contrary to the conventional pastoral world" (164).

Indeed, unlike Flory who can sustain some kind of cogent critique of imperial ideology, Gordon's "analysis" never rises above sophistry and self-righteousness, obsessively returning to his own feelings of romantic unfulfillment. For example, when discoursing on the "money-stink," Gordon thinks:

The types he saw all around him, especially the older men, made him squirm. That was what it meant to worship the money-god! To settle down, to Make Good, to sell your soul for a villa and an aspidistra! To turn into the typical little bowler-hatted sneak—Strube's "little man"—the little docile cit who slips home by the six-fifteen to a supper of cottage pie and stewed tinned pears, half an hour's listening-in to the B.B.C. Symphony Concert, and then perhaps a spot of licit sexual intercourse if his wife "feels in the mood!" What a fate! No, it isn't like that that one was meant to live. (48)

The implication here, as throughout, is that the worst thing about capitalism, after all, is not its effect on the poor or on the powerful or even on poetry, but rather on Gordon's romantic prospects and the quality of home-cooked meals and marital sex he has to look forward to.

This is all a terrible anticlimax given the sort of soul-searching, or at least affective intensity (beyond Gordon's one note of intense petulance), that might have accompanied his avowal that "[h]e had declared war on money" (45). Instead his formative solipsistic taste for the purity of ideal heterosexual relations leaves him completely impatient or incognizant of the complexities of other personal and social relations. He thus caricatures socialism as a system of repetitive factory work, poor food in a "communal kitchen," enforced "[c]ommunity-hikes," and widespread "abortion-clinics," rejecting it as an affected pose of those out of touch with bodies and babies and shrubbery and dismissing the theory as "[a]ll very well in its way, of course. Only

we don't want it" (88).²⁰ The standard of social-political critique here again is the impact on domestic privacy, home-cooked meals, and procreative sex. So when at the end of the novel Rosemary suggests she might get an abortion, since neither she nor Gordon can afford to raise a child, we are told that "[f]or the first time he grasped, with the only kind of knowledge that matters, what they were really talking about. The words 'a baby' took on a new significance. They did not mean any longer a mere abstract disaster, they meant a bud of flesh, a bit of himself, down there in her belly, alive and growing" (226). This flare-up of pastoral ("a bud [...] alive and growing") and privileging of supposedly concrete sensuous knowledge as "the only kind [...] that matters" becomes the decisive factor in resolving the romantic plot and in obviating the political one. Gordon's thoughts settle on a contemplation of a set of feeble spiritualist mysteries of "fully human life," such as the "mysterious way [he and Rosemary] were one flesh" and how "in the lives of common men the greed and fear [on which civilization is founded] are mysteriously transmuted into something nobler," most particularly due to the fact that such common men "begot children" (226, 239).

Rosemary's pregnancy thus brings Gordon's "war" against money to an end: he takes back his old job at the advertising agency and embraces the middle-class respectability symbolized by the previously-hated aspidistras, even decorating their new apartment with one.

²⁰ Another under-explored component of the Orwell imaginary is his consistent animus towards hiking and scouting (and their homoerotic subtexts). Some examples: Gordon refers to Rosemary's protestations at being sexually assaulted by him: "Don't you come the Girl Guide with me" (167). He mocks socialism by imagining "[c]ommunity-hikes from Marx Hostel to Lenin Hostel" (88). One of the hated advertising slogans Gordon re-encounters: "Hike all day on a slab of Vitamalt!" (6, 14, 235). In *Burmese Days*, Flory thinks of Macgregor: "Nasty old bladder of lard! he thought, watching Mr. Macgregor up the road. How his bottom did stick out in those tight khaki shorts. Like one of those beastly middle-aged scoutmasters, homosexuals almost to a man, that you see photographs of in the illustrated papers. Dressing himself up in those ridiculous clothes and exposing his pudgy, dimpled knees, because it is the pukka sahib thing to take exercise before breakfast—disgusting!" (77). In "Inside the Whale," Orwell describes the ascendancy of the group around Auden, Spender, and Isherwood by stating that "we have got out of the twilight of the gods into a sort of Boy Scout atmosphere of bare knees and community singing" (231).

Like the professional Catholics and Anglicans he had despised, astutely mocking with specific reference to T.S. Eliot how religious conversion was “a standing temptation to the intelligentsia,” Gordon himself rushes from a precipitous and failed revolt into the arms of a comforting and clean orthodoxy (88). At the end, “[n]ow that the thing was done he felt nothing but relief; relief that now at last he had finished with dirt, cold, hunger and loneliness and could get back to decent, fully human life” (237). Like *Burmese Days*’s, it is a disconcerting and existentially bleak ending, as confusing and irresolved in its own way as Flory’s suicide.²¹ It seems to belie all that came before, disavowing if not outright negating the entire social-political ambition or critique: one of Gordon’s final acts is to throw the manuscript drafts of his poetic work-in-progress *London Pleasures* literally down a drain (240). But only if we capitulate to Gordon’s perspective, could we see celebration of such capitulation as the point or intent of the novel. Though it is hard to separate the narrator from the protagonist, and I have not done so clearly enough above, the narrator is very often not in sympathy with Gordon, presenting him at least in his worst moments as a deeply unlikable and selfish person and not disguising the barely-suppressed violence and blatant misogyny that underwrites Gordon’s “successful” resolution of

²¹ Jonathan Culler’s “Fabula and Sjuzhet in the Analysis of Narrative” sheds light on how best to account for such significance-loaded events as Flory’s suicide or Gordon’s capitulation: “One could argue that every narrative operates according to [a] double logic, presenting its plot as a sequence of events which is prior to and independent of the given perspective on these events, and, at the same time, suggesting by its implicit claims to significance that these events are justified by their appropriateness to a thematic structure. As critics we adopt the first perspective when we debate the significance of a character’s actions (taking those actions as given). We adopt the second perspective when we discuss the appropriateness or inappropriateness of an ending (when we debate whether these actions are appropriate expressions of the thematic structure which ought to determine them)” (32). Here I demur from the former approach of treating these endings as givens that shed light on Orwell’s meanings or his character’s psychologies, but rather consider what these endings, as they offer resolutions to and insinuate connections between two distinct plots, reveal about the “thematic structure” of the novel, a structure organized by what Culler refers to as “demands of narrative coherence” or “demands of signification,” but that could equally be called ideology (30).

his dilemma.²² As with *Burmese Days*, Orwell's double-plot narrative construct and the seemingly unwelcome intrusions of Baudelairean insights offer a more complex and unresolved depiction of the paradox of a radical social-political critique grounded in liberal ideals than Gordon himself manages to express.

Debating Liberalism in Orwell II: Rorty and Williams on *1984*

I want to end this chapter by examining, in light of the above analyses, two of the most interesting and theoretically serious engagements with Orwell's political vision, Richard Rorty's essay "The last intellectual in Europe: Orwell on cruelty" in his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and Raymond Williams' monograph *Orwell*. Rorty's essay is a defense of the ostensible liberal core of Orwell's thought, in part critiquing Williams' book, which is in turn a critique of Orwell's ostensibly inadequate socialism. Here I will analyze their arguments and disagreements in light of their readings of *1984*: Rorty's essay is primarily focused on that novel, as is the Afterword to Williams' book entitled "*Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1984." I hope to demonstrate how the narrative structure and thematic content of Orwell's final novel shares considerable affinities with his first, *Burmese Days*, as well as with *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. A more careful attention to the intertwining of *1984*'s double plot and spatial imaginary complicates both Rorty's and Williams' assessments of that novel. I will address Rorty before Williams, that is out of order of publication, because Williams' earlier work contains a cogent critique of some of the operations of Rorty's later one.

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty is writing in explicit defense of the Western liberal democratic project, seeking to clearly distinguish its humanitarian political aims and

²² Raymond Williams comments in his *Orwell*: "What begins as a protest becomes a whine" (48).

successes from the intellectual successes and aims of recent Western philosophy's non-foundationalist, non-metaphysical ("ironic") forms of thought.²³ A modern Rortian subject then would be fluent in both the pragmatic discourse of Western liberal democracy and the academic discourse of Western ironic philosophy, but would carefully constrain his use of one or the other to the appropriate discursive situation, never forgetting the irrelevance of irony for politics or the inadequacy of pragmatism for philosophical inquiry. As Rorty says, his book "sketches a figure whom I call the 'liberal ironist.' I borrow my definition of 'liberal' from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do. I use 'ironist' to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires" (xv). I will go on below to identify this figure as a character in a Rortian double plot, one which could benefit from a more careful consideration of the less than successful outcomes of Orwellian double plots.

Not surprisingly, Rorty praises Orwell for insinuating in *1984* the right kinds of links and distinctions between public-ironic and private-liberal perspectives. For Rorty, the irony is primarily exemplified by Orwell's commitment to the contingency of future historical developments. Orwell, he says, "convinced us that there was a perfectly good chance that the same developments which had made human equality technically possible might make endless slavery possible. He did so by convincing us that nothing in the nature of truth, or man, or history was going to block that scenario" (175). The latter point, that the political developments of Oceania belie humanist essentialisms, is crucial for Rorty's positive assessment of Orwell's achievement, as when he reiterates approvingly that in *1984* "[w]hat our future rulers will be like

²³ Further, Rorty reads *1984* within a fairly complacent predisposition towards the power of the European novel in particular as the purveyor of liberal hope. In this regard, confer the troublingly Eurocentric epigraph by Milan Kundera to *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, which claims that the "precious essence of the European spirit is being held safe as in a treasure chest inside the history of the novel, the wisdom of the novel" (vii).

will not be determined by any large necessary truths about human nature and its relation to truth and justice, but by a lot of small contingent facts” (188). Given that the inexorable and unprogrammable influence of small contingent facts, along with the denial of a core human nature, are key motifs of the ironist plot of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty is here strongly aligning *1984* with his own project.

On the other hand, Orwell’s liberalism is primarily exemplified for Rorty by *1984*’s compelling re-description of contemporary political tendencies—“a redescription of what may happen or has been happening”—in terms of the dangers posed for individual freedom and autonomy, dangers not as clearly marked in then current “alternative descriptions of the same events” (173). Rorty thus does not praise the accuracy of Orwell’s analysis so much as its enduring pragmatic-discursive success in maintaining an ethical focus on the problem of freedom in the modern world: “Taking his earlier warnings against the greedy and stupid conservatives together with his warnings against the Communist oligarchs, his description of our political situation—of the dangers and options at hand—remains as useful as any we possess” (170). No small part of this usefulness is the highlighting of an intense form of cruelty as a correlate of non-liberal politics. In considering the extended scenes of torture inflicted by O’Brien on Winston in the last third of the novel, Rorty argues that the novel demonstrates how the violent reprogramming of Winston’s beliefs makes him “incoherent” and “no longer able to use a language or be a self” because he has become “incapable of weaving a coherent web of belief and desire” (179, 178). In this way, Rorty sees *1984* as providing a compelling story about the necessity of an un-ironic attachment to liberal freedoms as the core for any human meaning-making project.

There are, however, two significant problems with Rorty's conscription of Orwell to his liberal ironic project. These problems can be detected in Rorty's account of the pivotal scene in Winston's torture, in which the latter emotionally betrays Julia rather than face the prospect of rats biting his face. Rorty claims of this scene's outcome: "For Winston the sentence he could not utter sincerely and still be able to put himself back together was 'Do it to Julia!' and the worst thing in the world happened to be rats. But presumably each of us stands in the same relation to some sentence, and to some thing" (179). In the following paragraphs, I will pursue the inadequacy of Rorty's reading here in two ways. The first and minor point is that Winston is not a Rortian liberal ironist; his political liberalism is entirely predicated upon a personal metaphysics. This criticism is less crucial because Rorty's reading is not entirely predicated upon Orwell's intentions or Winston's motivations.²⁴ The second and significant critique to be made

²⁴ James Conant, in his "Freedom, Cruelty, and Truth: Rorty versus Orwell," spends an inordinate effort in pursuing this relatively unimportant point. In his "Response to James Conant," Rorty dispenses with this line of criticism by pointing out correctly that his "reading of [Orwell] was not intended to claim him as fellow pragmatist, but to explain why one could be a non-Realist and still have one's moral horizon expanded by *1984*" (344). Conant does not do much better with his central claim that he offers some third way between a Realist belief in an absolute "Truth" and a Rortian rejection of "Truth" as an objectively achievable goal. Conant identifies this sort of supposedly non-metaphysical, non-Realist truth with Winston's memories as they counter the official Party history. Conant claims that to fail to honor the value of those memories as a kind of truth, as Rorty seems to in his commitment to understanding "truth-seeking" as only ever a process of coherence-seeking consensus-building within a relevant community, is to underwrite totalitarian manipulations of public opinion and rewritings of history in which coherence and consensus powerfully militate against a lone dissident voice like Winston's. Conant insists that Orwell is not being "philosophical" (291) or "metaphysical" (283) or "biological" (312), for example arguing that "Orwell's interests are not those of the Realist; he employs the expression 'the concept of objective truth' in the context of seeking to distinguish between totalitarian and non-totalitarian scenarios" (303). But Conant can acquit Orwell here of philosophical-metaphysical-biological Realism only in the most trivial sense that Orwell did not think of himself as aligned with any such philosophical movement and was trying to do something different. It is in fact difficult to see how Conant's defense of these statements are not, as Rorty says, "crypto-Realist restatements" that unwarrantedly adjudicate the conflict between the socially agreed-upon truth (O'Brien's view as spokesman of the party) and an irreconcilable individual belief as to the truth (Winston's) in favor of Winston, for no other reason than a belief that Winston's memories are "intrinsically veridical" (347, 343). Rorty asks about what, if Conant is truly willing to relinquish a metaphysical basis to Winston's veridicality, "the relevance of the in-principle-distinguishability of the agreed-upon from the true" would in fact be "to some imagined argument between Winston and O'Brien," pointing out that "people with real or purported psychotic delusions" in fact stand in an identical position as Winston to their world (346, 342). Conant's passionate

of Rorty's reading of *1984* is that the novel's uneasily aligned liberal romance plot and ironic political plot, both suffering disastrous outcomes, can in fact be better read as warnings against the dangers of the Rortian compartmentalizing of personal and political concerns.

First, the lack of a liberal ironist perspective in the novel. The liberal vision at the core of *1984* is not based in something as abstract and universal as opposition to cruelty; "cruelty" *tout court* is not the worst thing in the world, rather betraying and losing Julia is. "Do it to Julia!" does not function as just Winston's contingent "some sentence," but rather as *the* sentence in the

defense of Winston could in fact be as easily applied in favor of the Unabomber. Rorty emphasizes how an individual's personal belief as to the truth of reality is never by itself, in isolation from a social context, meaningful or relevant. When Conant says that in the world of Oceania "one is asked to form one's beliefs about how things are in a manner that is no longer beholden to how things are" and that its people "learn to cultivate a tremendously thorough-going form of self-deception," he betrays a shocking naivete about how irrelevant "how things are" are to the construction and sustenance of beliefs in our own world and how characteristic "thorough-going self-deception" can be of those beliefs (299, 300). Conant is equally naïve in his conception that good historiography is that which is "answerable to a body of fact," which he claims characterizes histories of World War I since German and English historians agreed on those facts. He fails to see that he has actually demonstrated Rorty's claim that the "truth" of history here is a consensus-driven narrative among a community of historians, and the "truthfulness" of the history is a result of (and not the reason for) the wide-ranging consensus it has attracted in a mostly free discursive situation (298). I would add to Rorty's response by pointing out that Conant has failed to think sufficiently about the literariness of *1984*. He does not consider that the powerful truth effects of *1984* are in fact very much tied to a consensus-building community, not in the novel but of its readers, in a way that supports Rorty's theories. For if we are convinced that Winston is not psychotic, it is not because he is actually telling the truth (he is not a real person, since the novel is a fiction and none of this actually happened, and even if it did we only have the narrator's mediated word for it, so it makes no sense to share Conant's confidence that Winston's "statement remains warranted" [304] unless we believe every story we're told) but because of Orwell's descriptive success in addressing and persuading a growing readership that Winston's perspective coheres better with their own social and political experiences. If he could not have done that, we would be unlikely to be reading *1984* today or "believing" Winston. The Unabomber has never achieved such a sympathetic readership, despite having had an opportunity to offer his re-description of the modern world to a large audience. That is the only basis on which an adjudication of their sanity can be made, and the situation that makes it possible in both cases is the freedom to disseminate their stories widely (under not ideal conditions for the Unabomber, admittedly). Indeed, that Winston cannot find such an outlet for his theories on Oceania is, as Rorty would say, a problem of freedom, not of truth; how "true" his assessment is is neither determinable nor relevant in the absence of that freedom; what makes O'Brien so harmful is not his views but his denial of Winston's freedom to proffer his alternate ones. Also, from the perspective of my main argument, it is noteworthy that Conant manages to get through his lengthy analysis of *1984* without once mentioning Julia in the body of his essay and only once, quite incidentally, in a footnote (334n152), focusing (in a manner even more than Rorty) on the argumentative, and not the narrative or descriptive, aspects of the novel; that is, failing to understand he is reading a novel. Based on my arguments in chapter two, this failure to engage fictionality seriously has significant implications for Conant's account of "reality."

extended Orwellian imaginary with which to index society's irredeemable degradation and the futility of further rebellion. To simplify only a little, just as the very worst thing about imperialism is that Flory cannot have sex with Elizabeth, and the very worst thing about capitalism is that Gordon cannot have sex with Rosemary, so the very worst thing about totalitarianism is that Winston cannot have sex with Julia. Indeed, the most symptomatic features of the totalitarian state of Oceania center on its impingement on the possibility of non-sordid sexual relations (e.g., the Junior Anti-Sex League, the frigidity and desertion of Winston's first wife, the resort to a haggard toothless prostitute, the recognition of the beauty of buttocks only in an inaccessible prole woman, and of course, the enforced betrayal of Julia, who is referred to at one point by Winston as a rebel only from the waist down). Rorty's arguments that either Winston or the novel sustains a vision that "[s]ocialization [...] goes all the way down" or that they issue a "denial that there is such a thing as the autonomous individual" are not credible (185). There is an explicitly privileged and highly specific form of life, a fantasmatic setting for the full development of core human capabilities. In a striking parallel with Flory's domed "green grotto" turned "drawing-room" and Gordon's recessed "natural alcove" turned marital flat, Winston finds his sense of an ideal relation to the world in a pastoral "Golden Country" outside London, first in his dreams and eventually brought to life as the spot that Julia chooses to consummate their relationship.²⁵ Again as in the earlier novels, the sexual relationship born in a pastoral landscape finds its "natural" outcome in a cognate domestic space, here the bedroom above Mr. Charrington's junk shop, where Julia and Winston can secretly carry out their affair. This room could well be, down to most of its details, Gordon and Rosemary's flat fifty years on: "a strip of carpet on the floor, a picture or two on the walls, and a deep, slatternly armchair

²⁵ Consider *Burmese Days*' Elizabeth's "Lovely, lovely, golden world!" of her private school (94).

drawn up to the fireplace,” an “old-fashioned glass clock with a twelve-hour face,” “an enormous bed with the mattress still on it,” “a nice gateleg table in the corner there,” and “a small bookcase in the other corner.” For Winston, this décor inspires “a sort of ancestral memory” of domestic privacy (96-97). It is not an exaggeration to say that from Winston’s perspective the bedroom is the chief site of political resistance, even as arguably the most liberating and political act that happens there for Winston, even counting his reading of Goldstein’s book, is Julia making herself “far more feminine” with the application of perfume and make-up (143).²⁶ That this is a very confused resistance, I will return to presently.

Like his precursors Flory and Gordon, Winston’s political engagements are conditioned and constrained, activated and disarmed, by a powerful romantic pastoral vision. I offer here at length the perhaps most condensed and potent statement of this erotic-political imaginary, namely his early dream of the “Golden Country,” featuring Julia:

In the ragged hedge on the opposite side of the field the boughs of the elm trees were swaying very faintly in the breeze, their leaves just stirring in dense masses like women’s hair. Somewhere near at hand, though out of sight, there was a clear, slow-moving stream where dace were swimming in the pools under the willow trees.

The girl with dark hair was coming towards them across the field. With what seemed a single movement she tore off her clothes and flung them disdainfully aside. Her body was white and smooth, but it aroused no desire in him, indeed he barely looked at it. What overwhelmed him in that instant was admiration for the gesture with which she had thrown her clothes aside. With its grace and carelessness it seemed to annihilate a whole

²⁶ Orwell later provides another glimmer of a more disenchanted awareness of the metaphysics of femininity, at the moment when Julia and Winston realize they have been caught by the Thought Police. Upon this intrusion of an antagonistic political world into their Arcadia, the prior illusion of a “startling” “improvement in her appearance” gives way to a sense that the “[t]he smear of rouge that was still on each cheekbone stood out sharply, almost as though unconnected with the skin beneath” (143, 222).

culture, a whole system of thought, as though Big Brother and the Party and the Thought Police could all be swept into nothingness by a single splendid movement of the arm.

[...] Winston woke up with the word “Shakespeare” on his lips. (31-32)

What is most noteworthy is this dream text’s intricate weaving together of a certain natural pastoral (“leaves [...] like women’s hair” metamorphosing into a “girl with dark hair”), a certain national pastoral (“Shakespeare”!), and a certain sexual pastoral (a purified passion for a woman disrobing that “aroused no desire in him”), all as a phantasmatic model for political action (“the Party [...] swept into nothingness”), discloses a profoundly non-ironic foundation to Winston’s beliefs and endeavors.²⁷

Despite his explicit pronouncements, Rorty almost betrays an awareness of the “metaphysics” at the heart of *1984*, as when he reiterates of the betrayal of Julia that it is “a final, irreversible unmaking,” since “that he once wanted them to *do it to Julia* is not [a belief] he can weave a story around” (178). Or when he defends the novel’s bleakness by arguing that O’Brien “is not saying that the nature of man or power or history insures that that boot will grind down forever, but rather [...] he is saying that it just so happens that this is how things came out, and that it just so happens that the scenario can no longer be changed. As a matter of sheer contingent fact—as contingent as a comet or a virus—that is what the future is going to be” (183). Such un-ironic statements of irreversible conditions and determined futures suggest the second, and more significant, critique of Rorty’s reading, namely his lack of worry, in the name of contingency, over the purported eradication of contingency in Oceania, and his failure to tie this petrified historical vision back to Winston’s private liberal metaphysics (and also perhaps lack of

²⁷ On pastoral and irony: Hitchens writes of Orwell: “He had dirt under his fingernails, and an understanding of the rhythms of nature. Precisely for this reason, he was disinclined to romanticize the cult of the bucolic” (132). It is difficult to imagine a view more romantic than one which celebrates closeness with “the rhythms of nature.”

analogical insight in figuring human society as a comet, an image resonant with Benjamin's hurled angel). In ratifying the novel's suggestion that the Party's techniques of control are perfected and have placed identifiable and definitive limits to the re-descriptive capabilities of humans, that is in endorsing the possibility of a future like *1984*'s 1984, Rorty falsifies his own best understanding of the volatility of contingency, historical or psychological. And when Rorty further speculates, when writing of the figure that interests him most in the novel, O'Brien, that "[f]or a gifted and sensitive intellectual living in a posttotalitarian culture [...] torture is now the *only* art form and the *only* intellectual discipline available to such a person" and that O'Brien "does the *only* possible thing he can with [his ironist intellectual] gifts," he seems to outdo even Orwell's imagination of a fully determined social future (my emphases, 180, 187).²⁸ Indeed, "only" is a strange word to feature so prominently in the rhetoric of a theorist of contingency.

Many of Rorty's misapprehensions about the novel are due to his almost total inattention to the novel's romance plot, the intertwining of the novel's political horizons with its sexual foundations (as I have noted, a problem common to readers of Orwell).²⁹ Such an attention

²⁸ Philip Rieff's analysis of Orwell's conflict between private intellectualism and public liberalism, while giving a clearer sense of the role of Orwellian despair to his "crypto-conservative" admirers, shares many features with Rorty, and could be readily translated into a Rortian idiom: "Creativity [irony] undisciplined by morality and reason [liberalism] is still a dangerous possibility [politically], breaking through the forms in which it must be limited to be art [private]" (63, 70). Interestingly, Rieff here is elaborating upon Orwell's depiction of Henry Miller and not O'Brien.

²⁹ Rorty's failure to think contingently extends more broadly to his pronouncements about literary history. For example: "We would not now be reading and admiring Orwell's essays, studying his biography, or trying to integrate his vocabulary of moral deliberation into our own *unless* he had written *Animal Farm* and *1984*" and we will read these two "*only* as long as we describe the politics of the twentieth century as Orwell did" (my emphases, 169). These claims are seriously overstated, given the cultural profile Orwell had already achieved in the 1930s as a novelist, essayist, memoirist, and journalist and given the ongoing contingent endurance of critical interest in literary texts from political-cultural systems alien to our own, such as in "superannuated" political visions and contexts like Milton's, Burke's, and Carlyle's. As other examples, if Ivy Compton Burnett or Patrick Hamilton have managed to remain in print and studied, there is no good reason to think that an Orwell who stopped writing in 1940 would not have. In any case, Rorty contradicts himself on the very next page when he acknowledges such possible endurance in a changed political context: "Our descendants will read him as we read Swift"

would demonstrate the bleeding of private “metaphysical” attitudes, assumptions, and moods into supposedly ironical-radical political understandings.³⁰ Most centrally, and just as with Flory in *Burmese Days*, one would have to recognize how Winston is spurred to political rebellion by the advent of a sexual relationship (“Big Brother and the Party and the Thought Police [...] all [...] swept into nothingness by a single splendid movement of [Julia’s] arm”) and the end of his revolt is predicated on the destruction of that relationship (“Do it to Julia!”). While Winston’s torture is clearly provided as a motive for his betrayal of Julia, it is the fact of this personal betrayal, not any direct interdiction, that seemingly precludes any further possibility of politically challenging the Party. At their accidental and awkward final meeting, Julia and Winston recount their mutual betrayals, saying:

“And after that, you don’t feel the same towards the other person any longer.”

“No,” he said, “you don’t feel the same.”

There did not seem to be anything more to say. (295)

As in *Burmese Days*, a protagonist who has had his phantasmatic ideal of non-antagonistic personal relations shattered comes to grief confronting the unavoidable antagonisms of political relations.³¹

(170). Also when Rorty refers to the last two works as “Orwell’s best novels,” he should, by his own standards, be saying “Orwell’s most famous” (169).

³⁰ Rorty ties the conceptual material of *1984* to a post-WWII context (as a redescription of a post-war political situation), though its key aspects feature in all of Orwell’s novels back to the early 1930s, and are not so necessarily tied to the ideological struggle between fascism, communism, and liberalism as Rorty seems to imagine.

³¹ Rorty’s interlocutors in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* are united in their critique of Rorty’s complacent vision of politics, as he elaborates it in his “Response to Simon Critchley,” as an ongoing “conversation” whose basic mechanisms and parameters in the “rich Western democracies” are entirely adequate and his failure to forward an image of contestation that has a place for irresolvable antagonisms that would require a radical, perhaps (at least conceptually) violent re-shifting of those parameters by those not inclined to sit out and wait for the successful absorption of new forms of irony into liberal understandings over “the very long term” (46). Mouffe says, “Rorty’s understanding of social conflict is limited because he is unable to come to terms with the implications of value pluralism and accept that the

This is yet another demonstration of how, as this dissertation has argued throughout, engagements with domestic/sexual antagonisms are trainings and models for social-political engagements. All three Orwell novels I have considered here demonstrate the difficulty of being a liberal in the bedroom and an ironist in the public sphere.³² Even as Rorty implicitly credits Orwell's pragmatic re-descriptive success to an ironical attitude towards history—suggesting (yet again only implicitly) how successful, radical Rortian re-description is predicated upon an unmoored sense of human possibilities and desires—his own double plot denies the relevance of the connection. As Cary Wolfe argues in detail in “Making Contingency Safe for Liberalism,”

conflict between fundamental values can never be resolved. [...] This is why grasping the nature of democratic politics requires a coming to terms with the dimension of antagonism that is present in social relations” (6-7). Critchley says of Rorty's satisfaction with currently-existing institutions of liberal democracy: “Such remarks risk political complacency and can be read as a (re)descriptive apologetics for the inequality, intolerance, exploitation and disenfranchisement within actually existing liberal democracies” (24). Laclau says, “the idea of a ‘conversational’ grounding seems to add the further assumption of a necessarily peaceful process, as if the non-foundational nature of the grounding involved the ‘civilized’ character of the exchange. Now, this does not follow at all” (60). Derrida says, “there is a concept of politics and democracy as openness—where all are equal and where the public realm is open to all—which tends to deny, efface or prohibit the secret; in any case, it tends to limit the right to secrecy to the private domain, thereby establishing a culture of privacy [...]. This is a very serious matter, and it is against this interpretation of democracy that I have attempted to think an experience of the secret and of singularity to which the public realm has no right and no power” (80-81).

³² Again, his interlocutors in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* all have something critical to say about the Rortian double plot of the private ironist and the public liberal, and the non-credible psychology of an individual whose “public” attitudes are so neatly distinguished from his “private” ones. They all seek a less crisis-ridden and bipolar ethics. Chantal Mouffe writes: “It is Rorty's over-rigid distinction between public and private which blinds him to the complexity of the weaving between the two spheres, and which leads him to denounce any attempt to articulate the quest for individual autonomy with the question of social justice” (2). Simon Critchley writes: “it seems strange that the fact that we become ironists in the private realm seems to have few implications for our relation to the public realm. [...] Does not the public/private distinction of the self into ironist and liberal yield an impossible psychological *bi-cameralism*, which would be a recipe for political cynicism [...]?” (25). Ernesto Laclau writes: “the distinction [between the public and the private] itself becomes problematic and reveals itself as what it actually is—just an ideal-typical attempt at stabilizing an essentially unstable frontier which it constantly trespassed and overflowed by movements coming from its two sides: personal self-realization investing public aims, politization of the private sphere, private aims whose fulfillment requires legal recognition, etc.” (65). Jacques Derrida writes: “I must say that I obviously cannot accept the public/private distinction in the way he uses it in relation to my work. [...] For me, the texts that are *apparently* more literary, and more tied to the phenomena of natural language, like *Glas* or *La Carte postale*, are not evidence of a retreat towards the private, they are performative problematizations of the public/private distinction” (78-79).

“Rorty’s philosophical commitment to contingency and the radical pluralism it promises is recontained by his liberal humanism” (109). Rorty’s most perplexing claim in his essay on *1984* might in fact be that “[o]ne would have to be very odd to change one’s politics because one had become convinced, for example, that a coherence theory of truth was preferable to a correspondence theory” (182-183). Yet, it does not, as just one example, take much effort to imagine significant changes in the strategic use of political rhetoric that would attend one of these epistemologies against the other.

Raymond Williams more clearly intuits the problems with contingency in *1984*. While Rorty groups Williams among those “metaphysicians” who believe that “whether our future rulers are more like O’Brien or more like J.S. Mill” depends “on deep facts about human nature,” the most challenging part of Williams’ analysis does not critique Orwell’s supposed metaphysical errors but rather his insinuation of a future in which all contingent developments have, quite incredibly, been immobilized (187). Thinking through the demographics of Oceania and focusing on the actions, potential, and beliefs of the 85% of the population who are “proles,” Williams claims that Orwell “projects an enormous apathy on all the oppressed,” representing the mass of Oceania’s inhabitants as permanently controlled “unthinking sub-humans” (187, 78, 94). Through a comparative reading of Orwell’s fiction and nonfiction, Williams highlights Orwell’s inability or unwillingness to provide in his novels as complex a social-political picture as he demonstrated in his essays. These concerns about contingency are encapsulated in Williams’ question about “why [Orwell] created situations and people that, in comparison with his own written observations, are one-dimensional and determined” (81).³³ A more precise

³³ See the footnote above on how Williams’ claim that Orwell does not see capitalism as a system—“Orwell hated what he saw of the consequences of capitalism, but he was never able to see it, fully, as an economic and political *system*” (26)—is implicitly endorsed by the earlier Eagleton and mocked by the later Eagleton. Williams also includes critiques of Orwell’s “objective” mistakes, such as his

question, to which I will return, would be to ask what to make of the one-dimensional and deterministic worldviews of Orwell's protagonists. Indeed, it is unlikely that Orwell convinced any remotely thoughtful observer of society and politics, if not every reader, that the permanent ossification of a political dispensation like *1984*'s was ever a likelihood.³⁴ The novel's success with readers would need to be accounted for by reasons other than a gritty naturalism, focusing more on its hyperbolic, pathos-ridden artifices.

Williams' analysis also helps bring into focus Rorty's fairly narrow interpretative focus on the exchanges between O'Brien, as a representative of the class of intellectual elites, and Winston, in his role as a representative organic intellectual. Indeed, the majority of Rorty's reading is centered on the scenes of Winston's torture by O'Brien in the Ministry of Love during "the last third of *1984*," which he argues "is about O'Brien, not about Winston" (180). Rorty claims that "Orwell's second great achievement [...] was to convince the rest of us that O'Brien was, indeed, possible," which is what makes him "as terrifying a character as we are likely to meet in a book" (180, 176, 183). However, the overall structure of the novel is not honored in an analysis that takes what happens in the quasi-Socratic dialogues between O'Brien and Winston in the Ministry of Love as more important (or "greater") than what happens in the "golden

misapprehension "that the permanent and controlled war economy is shabby and under-supplied" and his too carelessly tying of totalitarian tendencies to socialism in his nomination of *IngSoc* (77). Williams speculates that perhaps Orwell "could see only authoritarian communism in the future, with no alternative or countervailing social forces," since "[f]ascism, when he was writing, had just been militarily defeated. Capitalism, he assumed, was finished and deserved to be finished. What then mattered was which kind of socialism would come through" (93, 115). Williams also notes that Orwell's envisaged the development of nuclear weapons and the Third World incorrectly (106-110).

³⁴ Though I formulate no claims about it here, Rorty might have had some professional interest in the *Telegraph* article "Norway Killer Anders Behring Breivik's Cultural References." Among the favorite books of the gunman in the June 22, 2011 attacks in Norway: "George Orwell – Nineteen Eighty-Four, Thomas Hobbes – *Leviathan*, John Stuart Mill – *On Liberty*, John Locke – *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Adam Smith – *The Wealth of Nations*, Edmund Burke – *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Ayn Rand – *Atlas Shrugged*, *The Fountainhead*, William James – *Pragmatism*, Carl von Clausewitz – *On War*, Fjordman – *Defeating Eurabia*."

country” or in the room above the junk shop. And even within the last one-third of the novel, to say that what happens in Room 101 of the Miniluv is more about O’Brien than Julia is perhaps arguable, but hardly self-evident. Williams’ reading helps illuminate how much Rorty, in this emphasis on O’Brien’s discourse, limits himself to the argumentative (one could say “philosophical”) aspects of the novel, without considering these aspects’ relation with equally important descriptive and narrative ones.³⁵

Williams’ greater insight is due to his more structuralist, more holistic account of the uneasily superimposed levels of the text of *1984*. He conceives of the novel as composed of three “layers” of formal-generic material, layers which “Orwell undoubtedly had problems in integrating” (97). Williams detects:

First, an infrastructure, immediately recognisable from Orwell’s other fiction, in which the hero-victim moves through a squalid world in a series of misunderstandings and disappointments, trying and failing to hold on to the possibility—as much a memory as a vision—of a sweeter kind of life. Second, a structure of argument, indeed of anticipations, in the extracts from the Book and in some of the more general descriptions of the actual society. Third, a superstructure, including many of the most memorable elements, in which, by a method ranging from fantasy to satire and parody, the cruelty

³⁵ One could speculate that Rorty’s interest in O’Brien is in figuring him as a warning for and against all his non-liberal ironist colleagues—“O’Brien is a plausible character-type of a possible future society, one in which the intellectuals had accepted the fact that liberal hopes had no chance of realization” (183)—and that the essay on *1984* is much less about Orwell’s novel than about a defense of the liberal ironist in Rorty’s contemporary philosophical-political culture. Rorty’s conversion of *1984* into a romance of intellectual life is especially odd, since on its own the work of intellectuals in Oceania, like Winston’s as a clerk in the Ministry of Truth or O’Brien as Inner Party ideologue, is a fairly incoherent epiphenomena of party rule. Williams notes how “if there is one thing that has not proved necessary, in manipulating majority opinion, it is systematically rewriting the past. On the contrary, the past in itself becomes a kind of memory hole, from which only a few scholars and researchers bother to uncover and recover the facts,” scholars whose efforts hardly register in the public sphere (122).

and repression of the society are made to appear at once ludicrous and savagely absurd.
(95-96)

While one could argue with the specifics of this schematization, particularly its recourse to a Marxist hierarchy of infrastructure and superstructure, it nonetheless highlights the incongruous juxtaposition of a romance plot (located primarily in Williams's first layer) with a political plot (in his third layer), and of narrative moments (which could cover the story told in both of these layers) with argumentative ones (Williams' second layer, which would include the many pages given over to direct transcriptions from Goldstein's Book and the novel's appendix containing a reprint of the diegetic Oceanic document "The Principles of Newspeak"). Rorty's assessment would have been better served by focusing on the relation of O'Brien to these other moments and stories.³⁶

Williams, however, does not consistently follow through on his own promising narratological insights here, or on their relevance for his earlier insights on the problem of contingency. Even while he recognizes the importance for the novel's structure of the search for "a sweeter kind of life," he rather peremptorily dismisses any analytical interest in Winston's particular vision of "sweetness."³⁷ He, too, centers his analysis on the novel's essayistic elements and downplays the relevance of the romance plot. So, while Williams does acknowledge that "[t]he Party campaign against sex is one of the stranger elements of the projection" and while he

³⁶ For example, his passing comment that a liberal ironist understands that "intellectual gifts [...] are as malleable as the sexual instinct" (187), would have to be heavily qualified by an examination of the intractability of the Orwellian sexual idyll: liberals, even if ironic or socialist, exactly do not understand that the sexual instinct is not just a site for political critique, but a foundational one. This applies no less to Williams.

³⁷ In *The Country and the City* Williams appears to demonstrate a greater awareness of the critical interest of cherished nostalgic visions, however insipid: "Is it anything more than a well-known habit of using the past, the 'good old days', as a stick to beat the present? [...] Nostalgia, it can be said, is universal and persistent; only other men's nostalgias offend. A memory of childhood can be said, persuasively, to have some permanent significance" (12).

does recognize the obvious homology of Winston and Julia's outing to the "golden country" to Gordon and Rosemary's "lovemaking trip to the country in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*," he sustains no interest in such matters (80). Williams treats the sexual life of Oceania as a mostly uninteresting borrowing from Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), saying censoriously that "in a filthy and repressive world there are deeper forms of personal resistance [...] than the temporary affair between Winston and Julia" (80).³⁸ He thus misses an opportunity to track those Empsonian "queer connections" in what he had already noted as a problematic integration of the infrastructure of the affair and the superstructure of the political critique. Further, in reproving the novels for not offering the more cogent political insights of the essays, i.e., the more pragmatic and argumentative engagements with actually-existing political institutions and tendencies, he ends up reading them with strategies or expectations unsuited to complex narrative constructs.

Instead, Williams unfortunately detours into an arguable but entirely speculative psychobiography of how Orwell "acted out the humiliation" of being an outsider to elite political culture—"[t]heoretically a member of the ruling class [...] but] in practice on the outer edge of the system" (18-19)—and elite literary culture—"hating the orthodox literary world but still carrying its instructions around in his mind to nag at and weaken his creative energy" (27, 18-19, 38). In doing this Williams ends up offering not a rigorous analysis of Orwell's literary output, but rather "a version and not a theory, a mood rather than an analysis susceptible of disproof" of the man Orwell, exactly what he had accused of Orwell of offering in regard to English society

³⁸ Similarly his generally astute structural reading of Orwell's 1930s novels notes how starting with *Burmese Days* "social criticism and the personal break are defined elements" (46). This obviously ignores the romance plot as a third crucial defined element, equally intertwined with the "personal break" as the "social criticism" (46).

and politics (27). A more nuanced reading might have demonstrated Orwell's narrative structures as disclosing, perhaps despite Orwell, a more stringent perspective on liberal politics.

Thus Williams, like Rorty, does not end up considering the problematic role of pastoral idealisms in political struggles and does not pursue the "strangeness" of the projected tie between sex and resistance in *1984*. In the end, he merely offers to replace Orwell's politically suspect Arcadia with his own more politically virtuous one. Williams criticizes Orwell's insufficiently class-conscious myth of England, in that "he creates the sense of an England of basic ordinariness and decency, a 'real England', 'an everlasting animal stretching into the future and the past', in which it can be seen almost as an accident, or at least as an evident archaism, that the 'wrong members' of the family are in control" (22).³⁹ It is, however, very difficult to distinguish this pastoral from the alternative that Williams offers; both feature narrowly nationalist visions centered on ideal forms of antagonism-free social communion. So, Williams would center his politics on the equally mythic "ordinary and continuing love of men and women, in friendship and in marriage" (81).⁴⁰ Similarly he says that "[o]f the many failures in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* this is perhaps the deepest. All the ordinary resources of personal life are written off as summarily as the *proles*. [...] Winston Smith is not like a man at all—in consciousness, in relationships, in the capacity for love and protection and endurance and loyalty" (81). And of life in Britain in the actual 1984, Williams celebrates its inhabitants "more real and more valued names and relationships and considerations" with their land (109). Just as Williams is right to suggest that *1984* has evacuated contingency from the political plot, he does

³⁹ In *The Country and the City* Williams also notes: "The shabby, ugly, exposed and lonely city of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the result of a perversion of the collective idea" (275).

⁴⁰ Benita Parry, in "A Critique Mishandled," notes related criticisms of Williams' narrowly Anglophilic radicalism, writing of his "disinclination to examine colonialism as integral to the making of metropolitan cultures" (123).

not seem to fully explore how this is related to the un-contingent private plot at the heart of *1984*, a plot that he shares in his rhetoric of redeeming “ordinary love” and radical “real relationships.”

CONCLUSION:

Modernity, not “Modernism”:

Woolf, Schmitt, and Political Aesthetics

Against “Modernism”

In this conclusion, I offer some of the implications of the preceding analysis for that literary-critical field that would likely be considered the most suitable—or at least most proximate—home for an analysis of mostly 1930s writers, “modernist studies,” by arguing that a full account of Virginia Woolf’s engagements with modernity—in the ways I have used that term throughout this dissertation—requires taking her outside of the narrower concerns of a “modernism” of which she is regularly taken as a quintessential exemplar. The literary-critical category of “modernism” is not simply narrow, but largely incoherent, whether as a period term that manages to exclude or subordinate the majority of the literary writing produced during any period so demarcated (especially work produced outside of the mainstream literary culture of a few western metropolises), or as a value judgment that has to argue counter-intuitively for the radical separability of the cultural products of a decade or two, or as a style that can account for supposedly unheralded developments in the entire range of “innovative” visual, built, and textual art of whatever demarcated period is under consideration.

Now, there is no denying that Woolf herself actively contributed to the idea of a “modernist” break, perhaps most famously in her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924), in which she wrote that “on or about December, 1910, human character changed” (96). And in this essay she also actively contributed to the idea that this “modernist” break was carried out by a small, loosely-aligned coterie of like-minded artists when she aligns herself with “Mr. Forster,

Mr. Lawrence, Mr. Strachey, Mr. Joyce, and Mr. Eliot” under the rubric of the Georgians (95). Generations of literary scholars have tended to take Woolf’s word—as they have tended to take the word of other “modernists” as to their significant “newness”—that she has made an aesthetic-conceptual leap beyond the narrative techniques and ideological assumptions of Arnold Bennett, one in a meaningful concert with her Georgian compatriots, without generally feeling the need to systematically read and engage Arnold Bennett (or H.G. Wells and John Galsworthy, the other writers that Woolf consigns under the label “Edwardian”).

Samuel Hynes has argued how a closer examination of this manifesto of “modernism” is needed and how far from objective the distinctions it seeks to uphold are. In “The Whole Contention between Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Woolf,” Hynes notes that “Woolf’s essay has come loose from its context, and is read as though it were a complete, objective statement of the differences between two writing generations. But in fact it is neither complete nor objective: it is simply one blow struck in a quarrel that ran for more than ten years, and was far more personal than generational. [...] We will understand both the essay and the combatants better if we understand the whole of their quarrel” (34). A later essay by Gloria Fromm, “Remythologizing Arnold Bennett,” both corrects Hynes’ caricature of Woolf as “a reserved, fastidious, aristocratic woman” and augments his central skepticism as to the value of “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” as sound literary history, as opposed to a record of the “modernist” ideology (36). Fromm’s most striking claim about Woolf and Bennett is that “after a certain point, Virginia Woolf could no longer read him: they were too similar” (29). Yet the popularity of the Woolfian misreading is encouraged by a critical practice that starts from the assumption that “modernism” was a real break, and is thus predisposed to read “modernist” texts tendentiously to search out and

emphasize characteristics that set them apart from what came before (and also after), encouraging blindness as to continuities.

Within literary history, there is no reason to think the conceptual and formal continuities are not as compelling as any particular set of variations or inflections that a given writer may place on what is after all an uninterrupted centuries-long literary-cultural tradition. Suspending assumptions about the “modernism” of a writer like Woolf can only lead to better, less predetermined and formulaic, readings of her texts. As things stand now, it is common to see her grouped under the label of “modernism” with writers such as T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, and Joseph Conrad. A large part of the claim here requires noting that whatever important connections these writers may share geographically, biographically, and thematically, their aesthetic responses to the political-philosophical contestations of their era are quite often irreconcilable. That is, there is little that could group them coherently if one were to consider, to put it crudely, their philosophy of modern life, their response to the eroding of metaphysical supports, or their sense of the significance of contingency and antagonism in human affairs. For example, in the way that I am suggesting we think about this literature, T.S. Eliot could not keep easy company with Woolf, as he so often does in literary-critical work, but would more meaningfully be aligned with such “submodernist” contemporaries as Evelyn Waugh and G.K. Chesterton.

A writer like Eliot, then, would, in his, to put it crudely again, narrative of cultural decline, and regardless of his stylistic and thematic “resonances” with someone like Woolf, belong with others who give us new ways to feel bad about the tendencies of the present, such as Waugh, whose 1930s output alike bemoans the perceived anti-spiritual degenerations of modernity. Such writers, in the face of a secular modernity, find themselves drawn to the

romance of a once meaningful social order safeguarded by highly institutionalized and ritualized religion. Apposite to this point, in an exchange in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Gordon's "parlour Socialist" friend Ravelston is bewildered that Gordon lists the Catholic Church as one of the three available alternatives to the full experience of modern life. Gordon retorts sharply, "Well, it's a standing temptation to the intelligentsia, isn't it?" to which Ravelston concedes "Not what *I* should call the intelligentsia. Though there was Eliot, of course" (88). This cannot obviously serve as a definitive verdict on Eliot, but it is to suggest a starting reconfiguration, one open to future refinements, and a provocation to rethink the canons of twentieth-century literature. Perhaps those who have succumbed to the standing temptation of highly-institutionalized and ritualized religions could provide one productive grouping.

Here I can offer only a very brief indication, via a compelling juxtaposition, as to what might result from such a reconfiguration. So even though there is striking thematic overlap between Conrad's *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (1907) and Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare* (1908) and even though both are highly inventive "modern" fictions of the early twentieth century, their narrative strategies and conceptual schemas provide a basis for meaningfully distinguishing them. A quite surprising concurrence, for example, between the two novels is in a character's meditation on the relation between order, disorder, and chaos, exemplified respectively by the police, thieves (common criminals), and anarchists (philosophical criminals).

The character of Chief Inspector Heat in Conrad's novel says of common (non-anarchist) criminals and the police:

They understand each other, which is advantageous to both, and establishes a sort of amenity in their relations. [...] And Chief Inspector Heat, arrested within six paces of the

anarchist nick-named the Professor, gave a thought of regret to the world of thieves—sane, without morbid ideals, working by routine, respectful of constituted authorities, free from all taint of hate and despair.

After paying this tribute to what is normal in the constitution of society (for the idea of thieving appeared to his instinct as normal as the idea of property), Chief Inspector Heat felt very angry with himself for having stopped [...]. (68-69)

Chesterton has a policeman tell his protagonist, the future secret policeman Gabriel Syme, something similar:

We say that the most dangerous criminal now is the entirely lawless modern philosopher. Compared to him, burglars and bigamists are essentially moral men; my heart goes out to them. They accept the essential ideal of man; they merely seek it wrongly. Thieves respect property. They merely wish the property to become their property that they may more perfectly respect it. But philosophers dislike property as property; they wish to destroy the very idea of personal possession. (44)

It is unclear if Chesterton is responding to Conrad, if there is another specific source that both are independently citing, or if both of their characters are simply coincidentally ventriloquizing a particular discourse common to their shared world.

Despite this concurrence of particular characters' understanding of crime in the modern world, these two novels' narrative strategies do not exhibit a shared perspective on this world, a fact most evident in the books' endings. The programmatic awakening at the end of Chesterton's "nightmare" in the forced serenity of a quasi-Arthurian fantasia (a Christianized version of the English national pastoral) in which the leader of both the anarchists and the secret police is revealed most likely to be—particularly given his gnomic recitation of Christ's question to James

and John “Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?”—none other than some version of the Christian God himself, leaving the anarchist position in disrepute (207). This is in stark contrast to Conrad’s insistent ironies, which throughout and to the end undermine every character’s self-understanding, the anarchists’ no less than the policemen’s, leaving the reader on no surer footing as to the epistemological validity of anarchism than when he began. Thus, even though both works contain thematically similar content as to a sense of the breakdown of values in a “modern” world, only one endorses the reality of a prior wholeness now broken as its privileged position. One could fairly easily make a similar contrast between an Eliot text like “The Waste Land” and a Woolf one like *Mrs. Dalloway*, both so often read together for their shared “resonances.”

Though there is not room to fully explore the phenomenon here, what is perhaps most disconcerting about the standing temptation of the theological is how it has drawn in even the supposedly most vehemently secular forms of Left philosophy. For example, it is surprising to discover Slavoj Žižek’s recent turn to exactly Chesterton in support of his perplexing argument that a truly universal understanding of humanity can only be achieved by passing through the Christian experience. In “From Job to Christ: A Paulinian Reading of Chesterton” Žižek argues that, “[f]ollowing Chesterton, one should conceive [...] the God who says ‘Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?’ as the exemplary case of the properly *dialectical* relationship between the Universal and the Particular [...]; the Universal ‘as such’ is the site of an unbearable antagonism, self-contradiction, and (the multitude of) its particular species are ultimately nothing but so many attempts to obfuscate/reconcile/master this antagonism” (45). One basically has to take this argument on faith, since it is impossible to see the necessity of the tie between this insight into universality and the story of Jesus or the writings of Paul. Indeed, Žižek seems motivated

primarily by the desire to narratively outstrip his philosophical rivals like Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Jacques Derrida by telling a more definitive story of Western philosophy, claiming the most prestigious origins (in this case Paul, who has become a cult figure for political theologians) as his own.

Otherwise, it is hard to see how Christianity is somehow the necessary stepping stone to begin the hop to Hegel to Marx to Lacan to Žižek, or why it is particularly less compromised by its history, or how it is more available for radical re-description than other ideological systems that equally purport to tell the story of the unfolding of humanity. In fact, it is hard to see how Christianity is not in a particularly unlikely place to fulfill Žižek's Marxist goal of enunciating a concrete universality wedded to an experience of antagonism. As Erik Vogt astutely questions, in "Schmittian Traces in Žižek's Political Theology (And Some Derridean Specters)," referring to some thoughts by Derrida, "if one grants the possibility of this interface between Christianity on the one hand, and the medium and mediatic on the other hand, would one not have to reposition Christianity—no longer along the lines of a politicizing logic of universality, but rather along the lines of a depoliticizing logic of globalization [...]?" (28). Neil Saccamano makes a similar point, again with reference to Derrida, when he writes that "[t]he instituting of a public space capable of providing a potentially worldwide medium of communication [...] is itself a historically marked phenomenon that cannot be severed from Christian universality" (420). I will not pursue the theoretical debate over Christian universality any further, except to note how interestingly a "submodernist" text like *The Man Who Was Thursday* can be read within political-philosophical debates that far exceed the frame of literary "modernism," and how central narratological issues—the kinds of stories one tells to communicate contingent understandings—are to such debates.

From the perspective of this dissertation, the same can be said of the relatively neglected literature and social theory of the 1930s as a whole, which poses significant problems for the category of “modernism.” Given how usefully this literature provides an archive of reflections on the disorientations of modernity, on the uneasy relations between political ideologies and aesthetic programs, and on the challenge of social history to a sense of sovereign autonomy, it is surprising that it has only a marginal place in conventional twentieth-century English literary history. It is far more convenient to relegate the formally more conventional 1930s literature as “topical” or “popular” or “engaged” in deference to studying the true stylistic achievements of the 1920s and 1910s. A typical literary history buries the 1930s between the culmination of “modernism” in 1922 and a “postmodernism” that registers historically only after 1945. The suggestion of this dissertation is that fully counting 1930s literary fiction and the political and social thought of the period (such as the writings by Schmitt, Adorno, Orwell, Benjamin, Empson, and Woolf considered here and in the preceding chapters) would encourage dramatic redrawings of the fairly limited cultural maps and timelines of European aesthetic “modernism.” A revised literary history (or more generally valid intellectual history) would minimally have to consider the “aesthetics” of the 1920s and the “politics” of the 1930s as of a single dialectical movement in order to bring them into line with the more well-grounded lineage of historical-philosophical modernity understood as a struggle to come to terms with social and psychological worlds bereft of traditional supports.

I quoted Jacques Rancière in the second chapter saying: “I do not like modernism as a concept, because it seeks to identify an entire regime of art with a few particular manifestations that it presents as exemplary, interprets in an extraordinarily restrictive way, and links to an absolutely uncritical idea of historical time.” My brief reading of Woolf below will serve to

bolster this claim that the cultural-critical hegemony of “modernism” as a period or stylistic term has had a distorting effect on our understanding of the culture of the twentieth century, relegating or subsuming cultural production occurring outside the conventional confines of “modernist” concerns and, perhaps as troublingly, heavily predetermining our readings and valuations of those often-taught and often-interpreted cultural productions recognized as canonically “modernist.” That is to say, the violence is not merely that we do not read George Orwell (or Christopher Isherwood or Jean Rhys or Ahmed Ali) in literature classrooms as often as Virginia Woolf, but it is as much that we read Virginia Woolf in highly routinized ways, reaching highly predictable conclusions, and too often unwarrantedly taking writers like her as somehow representative of their times.

I make this claim for Woolf as “modern-not-‘modernist’” by drawing out striking similarities between her text *Three Guineas* (1938) and the Weimar-era legal theorist Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political* (1927; 1932). Schmitt is already read within a broader intellectual tradition in which one could productively relocate Woolf, of reflections on the conflict between a cherished sense of individual autonomy and the compelling demands of social cohesion and order—one energized by Hobbes and Spinoza and not yet wound up in the present day, as seen for example in the debates over political theology, in which Schmitt plays a central role, alluded to above. Such a theoretical framing can also bring Woolf and Orwell into closer conversation, relating her effort in *Three Guineas* with what Orwell attempted in *Burmese Days*. Both works engage modern understandings of the innumerable contingencies that define the often wayward and antagonistic formations and interactions of subjects (the traditional, but by no means necessary, purview of novels) and bring these into some kind of analogy or juxtaposition with modern understandings of the innumerable contingencies that define the often wayward and

antagonistic formations and interactions of social groups (the traditional, but by no means necessary, purview of essays). Woolf's "novel-essay" is one attempt to construct a form that can keep faith with contingency, as are Orwell's essayistic novels. As in Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, which one could take as a master template for navigating such concerns with contingency and antagonism, sexuality plays a determinative role in both Woolf's and Orwell's efforts, as both writers struggle to elaborate upon the sometimes only roughly intuited connection between disenchanted understandings of sexuality and the nature of the political world.

Schmitt and the Aesthetics of the Decision

In brief, Schmitt emerges from a conservative tradition that takes very seriously the challenge that a sense of contingency and antagonism in human affairs—a full realization of the chaos and seeming-anarchy of social and historical developments, particularly given the instability of democracy and other politics driven by the mass and given the ubiquity, perhaps inevitability, of wars and revolutions—poses to the established bases of social order. In response to this problem, Schmitt forwards the need to maintain order, as opposed to sustaining justice or liberty, as the primary social value and the surest path to peace, a successful conservative stratagem that we saw Marx decrying in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Yet Schmitt's response does not lie in an appeal to religion or tradition. As Gopal Balakrishnan incisively notes of Schmitt, "[u]nlike other conservatives, he was skeptical about ideologies of organic reconciliation, and he attempted to address a problem at the core of Marxist reflections on politics—the possibility that political strife emerges out of irreconcilable contradictions."

We could call Schmitt part of a counter-Enlightenment, anti-liberal modernity. In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt deprecates liberalism's potential to ameliorate temporal social-

political agonisms, placing no faith in communicative rationality or discursive resolutions of conflicts or any of the other procedures or assumptions of democratic liberalism. But Schmitt is “modern” enough to reject any typically metaphysical or straightforwardly pastoral solution and grounds his reasoning in a harsh rightist pragmatism, declaring that politics is absolutely predicated upon the self-defense of friends from enemies. Given liberalism’s belief in individuality, universality, and pluralism, under Schmitt’s definition of the political there is “absolutely no liberal politics, only a liberal critique of politics” (70). A true “political entity must demand the sacrifice of life. Such a demand is in no way justifiable by the individualism of liberal thought” (71).

This “political entity” refers to the unchallenged authority of a sovereign ruler whose ability to declare an enemy, to recognize the threat of an enemy, is the foundation of political stability: “To the state as an essentially political entity belongs the *jus belli*, i.e., the real possibility of deciding in a concrete situation upon the enemy” (45). In “Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics,” Žižek glosses this Schmittian claim as saying that “the rule of law ultimately hinges on an abyssal act of violence [...] which is grounded in itself” and that “the decision which bridges this gap [between a ‘normative order’ and ‘actual life’] is not a decision for some concrete order, but primarily the decision for the formal principle of order as such. The concrete content of the imposed order is arbitrary, dependent on the Sovereign’s will, left to historical contingency” (18).

On the existential necessity of, almost defining human need for, such recognitions and declarations of friends from enemies, Schmitt claims that “[t]he friend and enemy concepts are to be understood in their concrete and existential sense, not as metaphors or symbols, not mixed and weakened by economic, moral, and other conceptions, least of all in a private-individualistic

sense as a psychological expression of private emotions and tendencies. They are neither normative nor pure spiritual antitheses” (27-28). In a paradoxical way Schmitt offers his prescriptions as more humanist than those of the liberals. Whereas their proceduralism and rationalism will lead to a technocratic dystopia, his focus on existential demands and innate psychologies is a humane attention to real needs and real politics. He says, thus, of the humaneness in the constant preparation for war that “[i]t would be ludicrous to believe that a defenseless people has nothing but friends, and it would be a deranged calculation to suppose that the enemy could perhaps be touched by the absence of a resistance” (53). Schmitt imagines that such *realpolitik* escapes from the pacifist and rationalist delusions of liberals.

What is interesting is how Schmitt ties liberalism and a certain vision of aesthetics together: “That art is a daughter of freedom, that aesthetic value judgment is absolutely autonomous, that artistic genius is sovereign—all this is axiomatic of liberalism. In some countries a genuine liberal pathos came to the fore only when this autonomous freedom of art was endangered by moralistic apostles of tradition” (72). Schmitt in turn has little patience for art, individuality, culture, or any of the cherished forms of liberal autonomy that he views as affectations unaffordable to a serious polity cognizant of the existential struggle for life. He says that his decisionism only focuses on “real human groupings and associations” and not on “abstract orders or norms” of “morality, law, and economics” (72-73). He does not, thus, acknowledge or recognize that any grouping is an aesthetic act of distribution, an abstract characterization of a mass of singular persons. This is no less true of the “distribution” of enemies apart from friends.

Chantal Mouffe, in “Carl Schmitt and the Paradox of Liberal Democracy,” notes how Schmitt “is often taken to task for neglecting the ‘friend’ side of his friend-enemy opposition”

(47). Given how centrally his politics is predicated on a distinction of the enemy, it is surprising that Schmitt gives almost no criteria as to how an enemy will be recognized, how the aesthetics of the sovereign will be carried out, other than such negative guides as:

The political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions. But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible. (27).

The underlying religious model for such a distinction between the politically chosen and the non-chosen is explicit in Schmitt: “all genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil” (61). Yet, even so, the distinction itself is not apparently motivated on religious grounds. In fact the most significant clue offered as to Schmitt’s decisionistic criteria is his statement that “[t]he authority to decide, in the form of a verdict on life and death [...] can also belong to another nonpolitical order within the political entity, for instance, to the family or to the head of the household” (47). Thus, there are strong indications that the model for organizing friends and enemies is made in reference to naturalized forms of kinship relations in family, clan, and tribe. As Mouffe says, “his distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is not really politically constructed; it is merely a recognition of already-existing borders” (50). That is, for all his harsh pragmatic political intensity, there is (as in so many other “wholly political” thinkers) a pastoral vision of natural human relations at the core of his thought.

Woolf and the Aesthetics of the Decision

Woolf's *Three Guineas* can be profitably read as an indirect response to Schmitt. Indeed, it is a text that almost requires critics to think about larger contexts for her. *Three Guineas* emerges from the abandoned text *The Pargiters* (1932), which attempted to say, in the form of a "novel-essay," something about both individuals' relations to each other (within families, romances, friendships, etc.) and to and as parts of larger groups (such as genders, classes, races, nations, etc.). However, being circumspect about didactic literature and about the difficulty of thus articulating the link of self and society, Woolf ultimately abandoned her plan to offer a fictional narrative that alternated sections with nonfictional commentary, a highly explicit form of double plotting. Instead, she split the two components of the book into their conventional genres: one half was revised and expanded as the novel *The Years* (1937), a multi-generational account of the fictional Pargiter family, and the other half was published as the polemic *Three Guineas*, a set of three quasi-epistolary responses to a pacifist's request for her public and financial support. Here I want to focus on a very narrow component of Woolf's thinking in *Three Guineas*, namely how she conceptualizes the form of her political decision to secure peace, chiefly the donation of the titular guineas.

Throughout, *Three Guineas* attempts to intertwine a critique of authoritarianism abroad with a critique of authoritarianism in the home, arguing "that the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; that the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other" (168). Her supposedly naïve intermixing of a critique of big-picture national and minor-scale domestic politics has caused considerable consternation, as Alex Zwerdling notes in "Anger and Conciliation in Woolf's Feminism": "It is the stress, in *Three Guineas*, on the connection between fascist brutality and ordinary, garden-variety impulses of

authority in the men of her own country that offended so many of Woolf's first readers" (82).

Within the text, Woolf repeatedly shifts focus between the functioning of governments and the functioning of families, for example ironically juxtaposing a newspaper report that an MP "urged the House of Commons to stand up to dictators" with a transcript from a police court in which a woman testified, "My husband insists that I call him 'Sir'" (214).

Her central claim is that pacifism must entail feminism and that a redress of women's exclusion from education and employment must stand logically prior to the effort for international peace. Judgments against her naiveté ignore the notable ambivalence underlying her propositions. Indeed, she first suggests that political antagonisms have no directly political solution, since the conflicts of political life mirror and repeat (at a distorting distance and scale) the dynamics of unresolved domestic conflicts:

There, in those quotations [of men arguing against women's entry into the professions], is the egg of the very same worm that we know under other names in other countries. There we have in embryo the creature, Dictator as we call him when he is Italian or German, who believes that he has the right, whether given by God, Nature, sex or race is immaterial, to dictate to other human beings how they shall live; what they shall do. (65)

But she then suggests that domestic antagonisms can have no directly domestic solution, given how readily women entering the public sphere are interpellated by its nationalist and capitalist ideologies, telling professional women that:

You will have to perform some duties [...] that are very barbarous. You will have to wear certain uniforms and profess certain loyalties. If you succeed in those professions the words 'For God and the Empire' will very likely be written, like the address on a dog-

collar, round your neck. [...] In short, you will have to lead the same lives and profess the same loyalties that professional men have professed for many centuries. (85)

The caution here is characteristic of the anti-utopian tone of the book as a whole.

Woolf's lack of romance as to the redemptive power of the hearth—a space in which women were made to intellectually “acquiesce” (21) and experienced “fear and anger” (154)—as a source or standard of social and political peace, can clearly be ascribed to her feminist awareness of the ways in which domestic life mirrors public life: “It is from this world [the institutions of power in the City of London] that the private house [...] has derived its creeds, its laws, its clothes and carpets, its beef and mutton” (23). In this she already anticipates Žižek's critique that “Schmitt's well-known answer [...] is *not radical enough*, in so far as it already displaces the *inherent* antagonism constitutive of the political on to the *external* relationship between Us and Them,” that he fails to recognize that “the relationship to an external Other as the enemy [is] a way of disavowing the *internal* struggle which traverses the social body” (27, 29). Woolf also emphasizes the ways in which public life in turn mirrors domestic life: “The daughters of educated men who were called, to their resentment, ‘feminists’ were in fact the advance guard of your own [pacifist] movement. [...] They were fighting the tyranny of the patriarchal state as you are fighting the tyranny of the Fascist state” (121). Thus not only the home, but the nation is disallowed as an adequate formulation or principle of order: “‘For,’ the outsider will say, ‘in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world’” (129).

Woolf's modernity can be tied to her melancholic ethical practice of engaging with historical contingencies, personally and politically: at one point she calls her decision to attach no conditions to her donation of a guinea to a fund for rebuilding a women's college “rather lame

and depressing,” given the likely effects of women’s professionalization (46). Indeed Woolf’s text is exemplary, both in itself and for the purposes of this dissertation, in refusing to pastoralize either home or country, either past or future (“It seems as if there were no progress in the human race, but only repetition” [80]), either men or women, and in recognizing the antagonistic forces that condition the formation of all those sites. Ultimately, the decisions she makes do not strive to produce any naturalized forms, such as ones based on the family; she does not seek to distinguish or arrange or distribute or divide the heterogeneity of her world. Neither is her work a romantic or infantile celebration of anarchic formlessness.

Instead, Woolf’s complex figuration of her agency is as the unnervingly contingent circulation of a coin released into a massive and chaotic economic-political system, its unprogrammable itinerary regularly traversing the conventionally fixed boundaries of the domestic and the social, and its ultimate effects out of her hands. Stephen Barber, in an essay on “Woolf, History, and the Novel,” characterizes this melancholic resignation to contingency as part of Woolf’s proto-Foucauldian “late discourse of the self.” Barber argues that in late works such as *Three Guineas*, Woolf “pursued an art of life—in the final analysis, a philosophical non-philosophy—that affirms historical contingency over necessity and a system that does not shut out, but one, too, that just as importantly does not shut one in” (205).

In this, to return to the beginning of the dissertation, she is in important ways like Baudelaire. Like him, Woolf throughout *Three Guineas* performs a range of affective dispositions towards her modern understandings—speaking as Zwerdling says “in different tones: charm, detachment, wit, anger, defiance” (87)—not just with the practiced gloom so often mistaken as profundity. And not just in different tones, but also in different voices, punctuating her text with the unvindicated phantasmatic complaints of historical women, what Teresa

Winterhalter in “‘What Else Can I Do But Write?’” describes as “a series of ventriloquistic displacements of her voice” (253). So when she begins to address her interlocutor, she acknowledges that they both come from what “it is convenient to call the educated class,” yet she continues:

But . . . those three dots mark a precipice, a gulf so deeply cut between us that for three years and more I have been sitting on my side of it wondering whether it is any use to try to speak across it. Let us then ask someone else—it is Mary Kingsley—to speak for us. “I don’t know if I ever revealed to you the fact that being allowed to learn German was *all* the paid-for education I ever had. Two thousand pounds was spent on my brother’s, I still hope not in vain.” (4)

And as can be seen in this citation, perhaps most strikingly, most like Baudelaire, is the proliferation of ellipses to indicate Woolf’s hesitations and uncertainties about the results of her actions and consequences of her formulations.

In chapter four I wrote about an ellipsis at the end of “The Swan,” saying that it offered “an anticlimax of unknowability (‘...’) rather than a confident universal truth” and noted that in this lyric “there is no angelic view, no cogent meta-narrative; the poet’s vision and knowledge give out at an earthly distal, temporal, and historical range, and in this sputtering in the face of an earth ridiculous and sublime the poem acquires its distinctive conceptual power.” The same power can be assigned to the modernity of *Three Guineas*.

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